Adolphe Retté

Symbolism:
Anecdotes and Memories

Translated from the French
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First English Translation

Symbolism: Anecdotes and Memories

by Adolphe Retté

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Translation 2025. by Claude AI (Anthropic)
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Adolphe Retté in 1894, photographed by Alphonse Bertillon.

A

M. LETRILLARD SAINT-ELME

Introduction

Nearly two decades have elapsed since Symbolism made its entrance upon the literary stage. Of the poets who formulated and embodied its doctrines, some are dead whilst others have seen extinguished the brilliant flame that once consumed them. Yet the finest have endured, evolving towards an art less confined to legend and reverie than that of their beginnings. Those who once worshipped exclusively at the shrine of moonlight and mist have opened their works to the sun. Others, alternating prose with verse, have given us novels that paint not only the centuries of splendour and glory but the fevered life of our own age. Still others have infused their cult of pure beauty with altruistic preoccupations. All, whether labouring in seclusion or mingling, as observers, with their contemporaries, have renewed Symbolism by nourishing it with the ripest fruits of pantheistic wisdom. For this they have been roundly criticised; but they have defended themselves admirably. Now that the years have rolled their levelling weight over the polemics of yesteryear, it may not be without interest to recount certain episodes from this struggle against the wits of the press, the splenetic Henry Fouquiers, the leaden naturalists and the hidebound Parnassians.

It has seemed fitting, too, to sketch in these pages the physiognomy of several Symbolists and of the Masters to whom they laid claim. Telling anecdotes have been included in abundance, and every effort made to avoid excessive partiality towards a movement that had, undoubtedly, its absurdities, but possessed also its grandeur.

What reigned supreme was a disinterested love of art. Fierce in their convictions, proud to be revolutionising French letters, the Symbolists admitted no tempering of their ideal's absolute nature. They fought for the triumph of *vers libre* and the glory of dream as others fight to found a religion or an empire. Every gainsayer was pierced by their barbed epigrams and virulent apostrophes. Their adversaries, for their part, gave no quarter. The result was an exchange of invective and blows still remembered—though reconciliation has since prevailed—by those who engaged most ardently in the fray.

Here follow some echoes of this *Iliad*, culled from the newspapers, reviews and pamphlets where the combatants prosecuted their war.

As might be expected, the writers whom the Symbolists assailed were hardly disposed to admit that the time had come to supplant with new formulae those theories which, buttressing their works, had brought them success. They branded as effrontery the deliberate manner in which the innovators sat in judgement upon them, and they derided their technical reforms.

Thus M. Sully-Prudhomme maintained that he found it impossible to recite Symbolist verse without losing his breath.—To which came the rejoinder: "That is because you are short of wind."

At the Academy, M. François Coppée lamented the "mist-laden gale that was blowing through poetry."

He was promptly advised to muffle himself in a comforter.

Instead of heeding this counsel, the author of *Le Coup de tampon*, in his response to M. de Heredia's reception speech, accused the Symbolists of showing themselves as ferocious towards their elders as the Caribs towards their prisoners of war.

At which the Symbolists declared themselves perfectly ready to dance the scalp dance round his poems torn to shreds.

Zola, speaking for the reviled naturalists, had the misfortune to tell a *reporter* who hastened to print the remark: "This Symbolist movement is the death-throes of idealist literature." And he had added, observing that youth was deserting him: "As for me, I am a solitary."

The word was pounced upon for this riposte: "Indeed, you are a *solitaire*—which is to say, an old tusker."[1]

Clearly, the tenor to which these polemics rose wanted for urbanity. But what can one expect of young poets persuaded, as is only fitting, that their innovations are justified, or of writers on the wane whose works are dismissed as antiquated and trite!

Besides, whenever a school establishes itself—that is, whenever men of letters united by a new conception of art join forces to propagate it—two orders of phenomena manifest themselves whose constant recurrence proves them ineluctable.

First, the innovators apply themselves to exposing the defects of the school that preceded them. To clear a space for themselves, they criticise—often with more vehemence than equity—those books in which their elders applied a method at variance with their own. Finally, they invoke one of the traditions that have shaped their country's art, however temporarily unfashionable that tradition may be.

The writers under attack, meanwhile, deny all value to the new formula. Having developed their individuality along contrary lines and cultivated a public accustomed to their lead, they can scarcely countenance the innovators' efforts to trespass upon their domain.

The incidents of this struggle, mutable in form yet identical in essence, exhibit, when all is said, certain phenomena inseparable from life's competitive arena.

So obligatory are they that we witness their reproduction today, as the Symbolists, grown sage and become "Chers Maîtres" in their turn, suffer the strictures of literature's latest arrivals.

These striplings cannot quite agree upon a suitable label for their endeavours. Some would be *naturists* and address one another as great geniuses. Others champion *humanism* and contemplate stimulating the lachrymal glands of those tender souls who frequent the Popular Universities. Several, lastly, convene congresses where they brandish the name of the *French School* like an oriflamme whilst "glimpsing," so they tell us, "tomorrows of wisdom"—a rather nebulous prospect.

The one thing on which they all agree is to announce that Symbolism is dead and buried, and to engrave upon its tomb epitaphs that, contrary to custom, contain far more censure than praise.

On learning of their own demise, the Symbolists pinched themselves to make sure they hadn't become ghosts. Having confirmed that their pulse still beat and their Muse's robe had not yet assumed the pleats of a shroud, they concluded that these ungracious funeral orations might be rendered in vulgar but vigorous parlance as: "Get out of my way—I want your spot."

Yet the Symbolists need only point these impatient young fellows to the books they never cease publishing:

Les gens que vous tuez se portent assez bien...

[Those you would bury are hale and hearty still...]

Funerals aside, if I've correctly grasped the charges brought against Symbolism by our recent innovators, it seems the Symbolists stand accused of being dreamers more preoccupied with polishing their style and pursuing chimeras than with engaging in the affairs of their contemporaries. They're blamed, too, for their excessive individualism, stubborn in the face of any discipline. Finally, they're charged with having hailed as geniuses poets whose talent showed more oddity than profound humanity.

These criticisms come rather late. I have perhaps more right than anyone to say so. For without casting myself as prophet or martyr, I can hardly forget that when our *Naturists*, *Humanists* and devotees of the *École Française* were still, I fancy, in short trousers, I was already battling against my generation's taste for artifice and barren daydreaming within that ivory tower they now wish to exchange for a soapbox. I published poems—among them *Similitudes* and *La Forêt bruissante*—in which critics were good enough to detect an altruistic spirit. I may well have helped steer my contemporaries towards pantheism and the love of nature through my critical campaigns. And I denounced a hundred times over, with a vehemence some still hold against me, the pernicious influence of the late Stéphane Mallarmé—earning myself, indeed, a bull of excommunication from M. André Gide, endorsed by sundry Mallarmé enthusiasts.

But what remains of Mallarmé today? The memory of a first-rate translator of Edgar Poe, a subtle conversationalist, and an incomplete poet who, after penning some fine verses that everyone agrees to admire, wandered off into cloudy sophistries that temporarily led even his keenest champions astray.

What also remains is M. de Gourmont's protest—last year he was thoroughly scandalised that nine poets in ten should prefer to Mallarmé Our Eternal Father: Victor Hugo.

The truth is, the Symbolists long ago returned from their excursion to the land of fog; they needed no Naturist edicts to quicken their interest in life. Read what they publish. Read, for instance, the verse and fiction of Messieurs de Régnier, Moréas, Verhaeren, Stuart Merrill, Paul Adam, and Kahn, or Maeterlinck's *La Vie des Abeilles*—there you'll find an expansive pantheism and, rendered in language at once learned, lucid and musical, a sharp-eyed view of modern society, nature in its most magnificent aspects, and robust sensations.

Though their aspirations remain somewhat nebulous, our newcomers appear to dream of striking out on a different path. They won't settle for voicing their personal joys and sorrows, or for depicting the manners of our time without extracting some useful moral. What they want above all is to preach, to set humanitarian ideas to rhyme, to establish a kind of poetic welfare system for the downtrodden. Weaving the crowd's clamour into their verses' cadence, they aspire to that role of poet-civiliser in which Lamartine and Hugo lavished part of their prodigious gifts.

Hence the organisers of one such congress I mentioned vowed to astound France and the universe with their altruistic fervour, proclaiming: "We shall be men at last and address humanity!"

Grand schemes, of the sort that blossom in young heads during the season of illusions. Yet these generous impulses urgently need embodiment. For one doesn't transform literature merely by issuing bombastic manifestos and consigning one's elders to the shades. One must also create works.

And we find nothing among these youngsters capable of interesting all humanity as they wish. M. Saint-Georges de Bouhélier, the Naturists' chorus-leader, has brought out poems of somewhat scrambled lyricism that suggest promise but hardly herald a universal genius. M. Fernand Gregh, who founded Humanism, has offered verses in muted tones whose rather precious charm we acknowledged —as did the Academy, which awarded them a prize. The École Française, meanwhile, holds forth at length in the little magazines—which suggests they may eventually have something to say.

But we see no sign of the genius who, gathering up and transfiguring all these scattered good intentions, will bequeath the twentieth century a new poetic dispensation.

He is being summoned from all sides, this great man. M. Robert d'Humières, in his preface to the engaging *Du Désir aux Destinées*, begs him to reveal himself. M. Adolphe Boschot, who attempted to reconcile M. Sully-Prudhomme with free verse, yearns for his arrival: "When will he come," he exclaims, "that blessed poet who, commanding his craft, will finally give voice to *living poetry*—his soul's spontaneous dialogue with nature—poetry diverse, supple, melodious and rhythmical, not some specialist's shopworn article?"

We hadn't realised poetry had expired. Still, such a poet's arrival would be most welcome. But let us remember: he would need an enormous wingspan to fill the vacancy left by Victor Hugo. Perhaps he'll soon be born. If so, I warrant the Symbolists will lead the applause. Meanwhile, one cannot too strongly encourage the Naturists, Humanists, and all those young people with a mania for manifestos to buttress their critiques with actual poems—poems whose feeling, rhythm and imagery pack enough punch to stir both the guild and a public one trusts will prove receptive.

This is precisely what many Symbolists have managed. And it was possibly harder than launching two or three movements.

Granted, the Symbolists have also been faulted for failing to trumpet their writings through shrewd publicity. Because they didn't camp out in newspaper offices, because they didn't court journalists who sound Fame's discordant horn or those Normalien critics who appoint themselves arbiters of literary propriety, they were virtually branded antisocial. This reputation took such firm root that provincial poets venturing to Paris to scout out these allegedly bearish hermits expressed amazement at finding perfectly civil people who didn't savage their callers.

I remember how M. Pierre Dévoluy—a gifted poet from Nice who has since become, I believe, something like sovereign of the Félibrige—after spending an evening with several of us, drew me aside to share his agreeable surprise at discovering we had manners. "From your polemical pieces," he confided, "I'd pictured meeting wild beasts forever roaring their theories and verses at innocent bystanders."

"That legend," I answered, "merits about as much credit as the one painting us as gaunt, pallid creatures in outlandish garb, forever droning deliquescent phrases in sepulchral tones."

I cite this exchange as but one instance of the thousand absurdities circulated about the Symbolists. In fact, most of us were robust specimens—highly strung, certainly, but hardly neurotic. We kept to ourselves, cherished one another's company, and preferred reciting splendid poetry to wasting time currying favour with the influential.

Having reached, as Dante puts it, the midpoint of life's path, I take a bittersweet pleasure in gathering up what memories remain of those days of battle for art's supremacy and burning conviction. As I summon them here beneath the noble trees of my beloved Fontainebleau forest, they seem to shed upon me the warmth and radiance of a September afternoon's golden light. If I can convey even a portion of this pleasure to my reader, I shall count my ink well spent.

Reviews and Journals

Whether it is the prism of memory that transforms them, I cannot say, but those little reviews and ephemeral journals where our theories came to ripeness and our first verses burst into bloom appear to me now as gardens of shimmering splendour, at times lost in iridescent haze, at times resounding with great lyrical winds that stir the leaves. Peacocks and swans—creatures beloved of the symbolists—strut the lawns and sail the ornamental waters. Unicorns "striking fire from their hooves" thunder down the allées. Beneath the arbours, amongst ever-springing clusters of "noble lilies," one finds only princesses "whose fingers blaze with carbuncles," knights bearing "white arms" who raise a star "upon their swords' proud points," fair ladies flourishing golden boughs spotted with blood, Greek heroes crushing grape-clusters into goblets or arming themselves for the boar-hunt: figures of legend whose forms melt into a mist of dream and distance. Then night ascends, blue and fragrant with spices, jewelled with nebulae that glow dimly as opals. Processions of magi pass by, intoning the tender verses of that dreaming sheikh who was then M. Gustave Kahn:

La nuit a des douceurs de brise dans les voiles
Et sur les rois perdus de douceurs infinies,
La blondeur de la nuit défaille en flots d'étoiles…

[The night holds sweetness like a breeze through sails
And over kings lost deep in infinite delights,
The blonde night swoons away in floods of stars…]

These were tapestries unfurled, whose exotic hues quite stupefied the devotees of that drunkard Coupeau and the unfortunate Elisa. In those days of rampant naturalism, we must have seemed like medieval minstrels who had stumbled into a factory reeking of machine oil and hot metal. Our endeavour to restore the gesture of beauty to art was deemed thoroughly outlandish.

Yet verse was not our only concern. We proclaimed our doctrines too, with a swagger that scandalised. And since both the established reviews and the newspapers—where we were regarded as dangerous lunatics—remained barred to us, we never tired of launching new journals to enlighten the "stupefied herd of humanity" regarding the mysteries of symbolism.

Others have chronicled certain of these periodicals in detail. The splendours of *Lutèce*, the first *Vogue*, the second *Revue indépendante* and *La Pléiade* have all been told. But I doubt whether anyone has written the history of *La Cravache*, the second *Vogue*, or that bold incursion we mounted into the very citadel of realism—namely, the review edited by M. Jean Jullien: *Art et Critique*. These, then, are the pioneering "rags" I shall resurrect in what follows.

LA CRAVACHE

On the left-hand side of the rue d'Aboukir, approaching from the rue Saint-Denis, there opened in 1888—and doubtless opens still—the Cour des Miracles. No longer the rogues' warren depicted by Victor Hugo in *Notre-Dame de Paris*, it remained nonetheless a yellowish, malodorous sink inhabited by the most motley population.

This courtyard housed a printing works. And in this printing works laboured a master-printer who owned a little journal called—heaven knows why—*La Cravache* [The Whip]. M. Georges Lecomte, future author of *Les Valets*, *Les Cartons verts* and *Le Veau d'or*, was at that period juggling the duties of infantry corporal with those of art critic. Hard pressed, as we all were, to find somewhere one might discourse freely on literature, he discovered—between spells of guard duty at the Bank—this tradesman whom he deemed worthy of the honour of publishing our prose and verse. By happy chance, *La Cravache* had just found itself bereft of contributors. M. Lecomte worked so persuasively upon the printer that he convinced him to place the journal in our hands, assuring him that a publication edited by writers—some already gaining recognition, others certain to achieve it—would earn him both the reputation of a Maecenas and more substantial rewards besides. The printer warmed to this scheme. And so it was settled: the journal would remain a weekly, we would fill three pages each Saturday however we pleased, whilst the fourth would be strictly reserved for a financial bulletin supplied by some stockjobber or other.

We embraced M. Georges Lecomte's plan all the more readily since the premises seemed propitious for those who claimed to work the miracle of utterly transforming literature. Besides, *La Cravache*'s contents displayed the most catholic tastes. True, the symbolists held sway—Messieurs Jean Moréas, Gustave Kahn, Henri de Régnier, Vielé-Griffin, Verhaeren and your present chronicler. But one also encountered Messieurs Huysmans, who contributed fragments from his study of the Bièvre; Hennique, who provided two chapters from his novel *Un Caractère*; the Rosny brothers, who supplied some prehistoric tales. Messieurs Paul Adam, Edmond Cousturier and Félix Fénéon offered art notes and exhibition notices. From time to time, M. Charles Morice would expound, "sub specie aeternitatis," the philosophy of that great poem *Le Rêve de Vivre*, whose publication we await to this day. Verlaine, meanwhile, published in *la Cravache* most of the poems later gathered in the volume entitled *Parallèlement*. When the sonnets of *Les Amies* appeared, the printer betrayed signs of alarm. We soothed him with assurances that judicial gentlemen never read poetry. In any case, M. Bérenger had not yet been invented.

The printer would have found far more cause for wonderment had he observed how our issues were assembled. But he hardly concerned himself: so long as we kept off the financial page, he was content. Yet some numbers contained nothing but verse; others, Vielé-Griffin's translations of Walt Whitman; still others, art criticism. Some days, copy flooded in; at other times, nobody had sent a thing. We then resorted, to fill our columns, to the elucubrations of one M. Anatole Cerfbeer.

This Cerfbeer was an odd fish indeed. Having completed, with M. Jules Christophe, a thoroughly respectable *Répertoire de la Comédie humaine* that bore witness to their devotion to Balzac's glory, he had dedicated himself to compiling a monograph on Paris's twenty arrondissements, examined from archaeological, historical and—contemporary political perspectives. This monograph was composed in a dialect somewhere between pidgin French and telegraphese.

Every Friday, at the hour when Saturday's issue was being assembled, M. Cerfbeer would present himself at *La Cravache*. He would scale the ladder to the editorial office—a garret furnished solely with an ink-blotched table, a rickety armchair and rolls of newsprint. He would wait in absolute silence whilst we settled the contents. If copy had materialised, he would depart. But if we found ourselves short, he would deposit upon the table the shapeless felt that covered his vast bald pate, unbutton the mustard-coloured overcoat that swept his ankles, and extract from his side pocket a

bundle of small sheets covered in minute script. Then it was as if verbal floodgates burst within him. Amidst fountains of spittle—for his delivery was decidedly moist—he would launch into exhaustive explanations of his work's manifold beauties, continuing until, worn down, we surrendered his papers to the compositors.

Even this did not satisfy him. He would invade the den where the presses roared, drenching the workmen in absurd instructions and driving the foreman to distraction by reciting his article's text up to half a dozen times.

Poor Cerfbeer, so tedious and so earnest! He has passed away. I like to think they buried him in a winding-sheet fashioned from pasted-together issues of *La Cravache*. He had earned such distinction, for when every daily had spurned his telegraphic prose, he became our salvation on those days when none of us had anything for the journal.

Yet even M. Cerfbeer sometimes failed us. One particular Friday, I discovered Georges Lecomte in the garret, trumpeting his distress and gesticulating wildly.

The moment he glimpsed me at the ladder's top, he pounced: "Retté, you must save us! I've nothing for tomorrow's issue, Barbey d'Aurevilly has just died, and you realise we'd be disgraced if we didn't dedicate an article to him. Sit yourself down and produce a transcendent obituary this instant!"

"Good Lord," I protested, "how can I conjure up a study of Barbey without warning? Naturally I admire the author of *L'Ensorcelée* and *Les Diaboliques* as much as anyone. But I haven't his books at hand, and besides, one can hardly fill *La Cravache*'s twelve columns with Barbey alone."

Georges Lecomte pondered briefly, then yanked open the table drawer and produced a crumpled manuscript of verses.

"Perfect!" he exclaimed. "Some provincial versifier sent these three months ago. They're nothing special but they'll fill four columns. You handle the other eight—I implore you by all that's holy to art, to literature, to everything you hold dear!"

I allowed myself to be swayed. Sitting cross-legged with a roll of newsprint for a desk, I dashed off the required article in two hours. They printed it still warm, and *La Cravache*'s honour was preserved. Though I venture to say, without fear of contradiction, that this article was hardly a masterwork.

The choicest part was that our provincial poet, ecstatic at appearing in a Parisian journal, sent us a letter brimming with gratitude and proceeded to deluge us with verses. They arrived by every post. Naturally, we took excellent care never to print them.

Yet despite all the wit and ingenuity lavished upon *La Cravache*, despite the worthy prose and poems our contributors supplied, the journal remained utterly obscure. We boasted a single subscriber, recruited by Félix Fénéon. Furthermore, we had entirely neglected the matter of distribution, with the result that each issue produced spectacular losses.

Eventually the printer's patience expired. He upbraided us for our persistent lack of fame, announced that his wife found our literature incomprehensible, and finally requested—with scant courtesy—that we take our business elsewhere, preferably to the furthest possible remove from his

establishment. We pleaded for time, warned him that posterity would damn him for abandoning us—all to no avail. And thus symbolism found itself out on the pavement…

THE SECOND *VOGUE*

Finding a new printer proved no simple task. To begin with, the reputation for extravagance that so many journalists had pinned on us made people wary; few would risk their good name by abetting poets whose tendencies *Le Charivari* and the *Revue des Deux-Mondes* roundly condemned. I cannot insist too strongly: public opinion had crystallised around the pronouncements of those hasty scribblers who, having affected to take seriously that delightful spoof by Messieurs Gabriel Vicaire and Henri Beauclair—*Les Déliquescences d'Adoré Floupette*—held it up as the epitome of our art and branded us, with questionable good faith, either charlatans or incomprehensible decadents. Admittedly, our habit of brushing aside like so much chaff anyone who, knowing nothing of the matter, presumed to hold forth about poetry apropos of our verses, was hardly calculated to win us allies in the press. Thus our only conceivable champions were M. Félicien Champsaur and M. Jean Lorrain. All other journalists, goaded moreover by the naturalists and Parnassians whom our critiques had stung to the quick, thrashed us relentlessly. Henry Fouquier, who would have heaped roses upon us had we greased his palm, could not forgive our contempt and led the chorus of invective. Now that symbolism has carried the day and the symbolists, through sheer tenacity, have cultivated their own audience, the plaudits come thick and fast—proving yet again that patience and faith in the justice of one's cause remain the writer's prime virtues.

But in 1889 the wind blew quite differently. Printers turned us away on account of our reputation. What's more, our purse being often decidedly flat, we needed credit and could not, with ready gold, bend these obstinate tradesmen to our will.

Thus circumstanced, I remembered that a clerk-editor at the Ministry of Posts and Telegraphs, who bore the resonant name of Michelis di Rienzi and boasted descent from Rome's celebrated tribune, had spoken of a printer who might perhaps consent to take us in.

Besotted with occultism, M. Rienzi had co-authored with this printer—himself given to mahatmas—a pamphlet on esoteric Buddhism. Moreover, he fancied he'd discerned that our penchant for analogies and correspondences, manifest in so much of our verse and in the store we set by Arthur Rimbaud's famous sonnet *Les Voyelles*, would eventually make us acolytes of his master: Swedenborg. He had even published two pieces in this vein in some minor sheet: one on my first book, *Cloches dans la Nuit*; the other on M. Vielé-Griffin's *Joies*.

He furnished me with a glowing letter of introduction to the typographical magus, whom he dubbed—esoterically—Arcturus. This gentleman resided in the Marais, near the Place des Vosges. Once shown into his office, I first marvelled at walls festooned with pentacles and vaguely Tibetan inscriptions rendered in gilt cardboard. Then I studied my host. Here was a long, gaunt frame encased in a black frock coat and crowned with a pallid, bearded, and solemn countenance. His eyes hid behind spectacles fitted with enormous blue lenses.

Arcturus perused the letter, then requested I clarify my postulations. As I laid out our difficulties and the advantage he stood to gain by extending us credit, he wandered about the chamber, appearing scarcely to attend.

When I'd done, he halted before me and enquired: "Are you initiates?"

So keen was I to see us printed that I nearly answered in the affirmative... Truth won out. I replied that I'd read various works on hermeticism, that I'd witnessed M. Péladan swathing himself in a length of Turkey red that served as his chlamys[2], but that my grasp of the occult remained decidedly foggy. I added that I asked nothing better than to be enlightened.

Upon which Arcturus raised a prophetic finger and embarked, in sepulchral tones, upon an interminable disquisition. He regaled me with the most extraordinary gallimaufry conceivable. He expatiated on Atma and Karma, the perispirit and the astral plane. He invoked the *Sepher Yetzirah* and the *Pistis Sophia*, Éliphas Lévy and M. Fabre des Essarts, gnostic patriarch, Madame Blavatsky and the Duchess of Pomar; he glossed M. Papus's *L'Initiation* and Stanislas de Guaita's *Le Serpent de la Genèse*. He lauded Crookes and execrated Dr Gibier…[3]

I bore it patiently. When after some thirty minutes he paused to catch his breath, I hazarded: "Your discourse is utterly persuasive, but will you take on our printing?"

Arcturus communed with himself and, having dabbed the perspiration bathing his brow, pronounced: "I must consult my familiar. Return tomorrow."

Return I did, without fail. The oracle had proved favourable. We agreed that not only would we appear monthly in fascicles of two hundred pages, but that we should be printed in spanking new Elzevir type.

Symbolism was rescued! And thus was born the second *Vogue*, Gustave Kahn editor-in-chief, Adolphe Retté editorial secretary.

There had been a first *Vogue* in 1886-87, graced by Verlaine, Jean Moréas, Jules Laforgue, Gustave Kahn, Charles Vignier, where M. Charles Henry rehearsed the outlandish aesthetic he would subsequently elaborate in the *Revue Indépendante*, and where Arthur Rimbaud's *Illuminations* and *Une Saison en enfer* first saw print.

The second *Vogue*, less of a ragbag than its predecessor, appeared in July 1889, at the height of the Exposition. Its chief contributors included Paul Adam, Henri de Régnier, Francis Vielé-Griffin, Félix Fénéon, Maurice de Fleury, and Georges Vanor. Gustave Kahn supplied the literary criticism; the others furnished stories, poems, and aesthetic essays, whilst under the rubric *Notes et notules* appeared squibs in which our detractors were skewered with consummate artistry.

I shall reproduce two pieces from the August number, and for two reasons. First, when the second *Vogue* expired, I had all remaining copies—a considerable quantity—destroyed. This auto-da-fé has rendered it utterly unobtainable, and I doubt whether the most relentless ferrets amongst the quayside bookstalls could unearth a single fascicle. Second, these articles demonstrate that we who stood accused of shunning contemporary life to moon about in some fanciful Thebaid knew perfectly well how to mine our surroundings for tableaux that wanted neither modernity nor a distinctive blend of mockery and lyricism in our treatment of events and personalities. This manner has since found imitators, though none have matched it.

We had determined to showcase the Exposition. This August number duly honoured our self-imposed mandate. Here are its contents:

Gustave Kahn: *Chronicle, French Art at the Exposition.*

Adolphe Retté: *Bars and Brasseries at the Exposition.*

Henri de Régnier: *Open-Air Entertainments.*

Jean Thorel: *Telles choses n'advinrent, travel account.*

Maurice de Fleury: *Tola, tale.*

Edmond Cousturier: *Bookbinding at the Exposition.*

Notes and Jottings.

Here follows M. Henri de Régnier's contribution. Its reproduction is doubly warranted, as the poet has never collected it in any volume and it stands, besides, as an exemplar of flowing prose and wit.

OPEN-AIR SPECTACLES

"Having spent long years amongst pillaging, tattooed men notorious for their vindictive and triumphant habit of scalping—thus creating bloody bare crowns—Colonel Cody nonetheless bears witness, through the intact flowing locks beneath the most romantic hat to shade luxuriant tresses since the Young France movement, to having escaped all tonsure. This miracle he explains through his superior marksmanship, his equestrian prowess, and the legendary good fortune of a true Hardy.

What he presents us, in essence, is the retrospective daily spectacle of his trapper's life, performed whenever ten thousand souls demand it, against a circular backdrop of Rocky Mountains and rivers painted on canvas that weds its sky to the sky of day, all achieved through Indians, horses, buffalo, lassos and stagecoaches—a naive and entertaining apotheosis (smiled upon by that repository of power, M. Carnot[4], with his dark and kindly countenance, and applauded by journalists, mirthful municipal councillors and titled worthies) of his personal valour and skill, assisted in these itinerant exhibitions by the ancient, savage elements of his former destiny, now transformed into docile and authentic supporting players.

The appeal of these performances lies less in such personal vainglory than in the diverse feats of horsemanship and the juggling of fragile eggs shattered by the unerring rifle shot, but above all in the presence of men whose reputation as warriors and hunters furnished the stuff of our childhood curiosities through countless novels from across the waters. How splendid that we may behold them with their riding prowess, their magnificent plumage, leathers and tattoos, and glimpse the intimacy of their tents where our old reveries once made camp amongst imaginary forests and romantic perils.

Straight-haired, lithe and nimble, creeping like serpents or riding as fearless horsemen, painted in brilliant hues, heads plumed with feathers, they burst forth at full gallop and scatter in disparate

flights like dazzling birds! Their horsemanship proves fascinating and coherent in its true incorporation of man and mount—genuinely centaurian, creating the illusion that a single, twinned creature wheels, flees or rears. How different from the vapid expertise of circus riders, those mere gymnasts whose method is to juxtapose horseman and horse whilst demonstrating their mutual independence, leaving the subjugated back unencumbered through some vault or caper. But these riders, granted weightlessness by their plumes, appear as the very incarnation of velocity, sustaining the delightful ambiguity of witnessing some Pegasean creature at play—earthbound yet aerial, gloriously ambiguous.

For this quadrille, the *Speaker* from his grassy hillock, commanding in mongrel tongue, recreates these savage customs: they display themselves raiding mail coaches and settlers' cabins, roping wild horses with lassos, and performing their allegorical dances of War and Love.

The Cowboys prove admirably adept with the lasso and appear perfectly suited to execute, along darkened streets, *le coup du père François*[5]—though mercifully they abstain.

This seemingly harmless spectacle possesses, I believe, a hidden significance, connecting to a current tendency that merits denunciation. It represents one of the achievements, wrought through some occult civilising imperative, in this year commemorating our credulous faith in illusory progress—all aimed at the definitive disenchantment of the human soul through hatred of mystery and dreams.

Just as electric light banishes shadow and creates an atmosphere of pitiless lucidity, so too they seek to abolish and illuminate the last remaining wellsprings of reverie in the human and popular soul. From the marvellous, nebulous depths of the earth's far reaches, they drag forth beings and things whose existence, known merely through a name, once proved fertile ground for dreams, exhibiting them in all their diminished reality to our disillusioned gaze. All the mystery that the words Iroquois or Huron conjured for old Voltaire, or even for Chateaubriand's readers—all that the word Indian signified—evaporates once the representatives or cousins of these races stand before us, present in their demythologised flesh.

Henceforth, for the modern citizen of 1889, the Orient—that ancient treasury of dreams, with its aura of wondrous dances, gleaming silks, and unknown melodies—will crystallise in the bourgeois imagination as some tawdry entity glimpsed in a fairground booth. The mysterious name of Almeh[6] will attach itself like a worthless paste jewel to the forehead of some 'belly dancer' who, dubious specimen that she is, usurps the throne of our imagined sultanas.

Those distant, mysterious lands—like verdant Java that slumbered in our dreams' recesses, amid the gentle rustle of its delicate bamboo and the scattered cries of exotic birds—stand violated. The enchanting beauty of those three diminutive Mimes, their porcelain hands, the antique gold of their saffron skin, their barely-opened eyes, offer scant consolation for knowing them through means other than the tall tales of some senile, mendacious sailor. Nothing can restore the dreams that a few subtle hints might have woven around them.

Artists may find amusement in these piecemeal exhibitions whilst preserving intact the wellspring of reverie from which these are merely scattered pearls, but the common soul will derive only further aridity from the experience.

Through such means, the bourgeois soul finds itself liberated from that preservative mystery which still troubled it—the knowledge that beyond itself existed the unknown in whatever form. But

now, how shall we convince such a man that he hasn't seen everything, that he isn't truly the centre of creation?

The man of 1890, having greeted with knowing smile the Redskins, the Almehs, the Annamites, the Javanese, will rest content and confirmed in his assumptions. The pavilion of human habitation reassures him about the past; rendered sterile, inoculated against any weakness for being taken in by dreams, he shall dedicate himself wholeheartedly to nurturing his egotism.

And consider that to fortify this conviction he shall have the comforting spectacle of the Machinery Gallery, the inscriptions on Raspail's statue pedestal (where that immortal chemist's inanity stands carved in stone), and that turreted, rigid form that scandalises Paris—symbol of what the city has symbolically received within itself, deflowering it anew!"[7]

Here follows my article—which I have likewise omitted from my published volumes to date. Its good humour and gentle irony met with some success. The passage concerning Van Houten cocoa[8] has rather an amusing history, which I shall relate presently.

BARS AND BRASSERIES AT THE EXPOSITION

To catalogue them all would be a cicerone's labour, which appeals to me not in the slightest; I shall therefore simply recount what detained me at certain establishments in the course of my perambulations and intervals of repose.

Since the public's formal stance at the Exposition is one of touchingly earnest determination to sample everything knowledgeably—an objective rendered ever more attainable, given our age's burgeoning enlightenment—I think it valuable to acquaint them with those establishments which, beyond the mere diversion of exotic libations, afford the means to gratify that aesthetic sensibility so artfully concealed yet so genuinely present.

May the well-disposed be grateful!

Near the entrance, not far from the École Militaire, after thoughtful contemplation of this Palace of Machines—that glory of iron and glass, delight of Monsieur Émile Zola and his ilk, this glittering vault festooned with industrial vapours and crowned by a lengthy clothesline where motley rags hang drying (the washing, I presume, of the Rue du Caire's inhabitants)—do step inside.

The Exposition en bloc, let me state once and for all, is quite magnificent, and I thoroughly condemn those who presume to level disdainful *caveats* at it. For clearly, were it otherwise, those earnest and disinterested writers whose prose hymns its wonders in the daily columns of our public prints would hold their peace—and then how should the citizenry, who draw their cues from such sources, know what merits admiration when no one tells them what is admirable?

Here is further proof of its perfection: *La Vogue* (*La Vogue*: Weia! Waga! etc.), ever true to its title, takes notice of it, steadfast in the axiom that what finds favour with *everyone* is truly fine. To which I might add—and this reflects poorly on the aforementioned prose-mongers—that when the public

errs, it errs through ignorance, for the dear public asks only to be given a proper sentiment, and how readily it proves favourable when properly directed...

Step inside, then.—But first, know that in this Gallery of Machines, whose Senegalese temperatures doubtless made you lament the dearth of refreshments, learn that near that singularly monumental contraption where coloured glasses proclaim the name, and where deplorable chromolithographs chronicle the chequered career of the phonograph's progenitor, there are dispensed by a callow youth decidedly of the Batignolles type, sorbets—coffee, vanilla, and so forth.

O sorbets, exiled amidst the Yankee din of machinery! Sorbets conjuring tranquil patios abloom with pomegranates, melodious fountains, and the cool serenity of Moorish interiors, far from this infernal hall where flywheels whirl like demented dervishes—blessed sorbets!

Before abandoning the Palace of Machines on this note of misplaced lyricism, I must record a cryptic pronouncement overheard from a worthy working man emerging from an audience with a chattering phonograph: "Ah!" quoth he, wagging his head sagely, "that's second sight, that is." Indeed, my good fellow, and rest assured that Mister Edison's second sight is merely another form of publicity. —There's sound sense in the common folk, whatever people say.

Now let us make our exit, hasten through this thirty-metre gallery graced with copper preserving pans, a papier-mâché grotto-fountain at whose depths a paper-pulp Diana shivers, the whole adorned with a Cavaillé-Coll organ[9] whose Catholic yearnings wring forth Bach and Palestrina at appointed hours for the edification of gawkers who attend solely to the organist's fingerwork.

Outside: gardens, cafés, bars, brasseries, chairs marshalled in close formation, those execrable three-legged tables forever threatening to topple—but where art thou, Agénor de Cluses[10]?—Swiss café, Russian café, Belgian café, and everywhere the same surly waiters, the eternal grimy cloth, the brief jacket and the insolence (not even polyglot), labouring to foist upon you coinage of dubious denomination. Nothing of note here, save perhaps in one English bar, certain chocolate-hued Sinhalese[11] in flowing saffron robes and pristine turbans, plausible descendants of noble Hanuman[12].

Yet here, abutting the central dome, presents itself an establishment of genuine interest. Extolled by ten thousand advertisements—and truly excellent—Van Houten's cocoa has established its premises.

A Dutch interior: the walls display Delft tiles in blue and white camaïeu[13]; a naïve gospel unfolds there—soldiers seemingly escaped from canvases by Jan Steen and Teniers scourge a Christ bearing a reed taller than himself; a Pilate in rabbinical garb ablutes in a primitive basin; a diminutive prodigal son tends gargantuan swine in defiance of all perspective; and so forth—but all rendered with such enchanting gaucherie[14]! A monumental wooden clock, dark-timbered, with brass face and tortuous hands, tolls the hours, accompanying them with delicate chimes. Then the hearth, the obligatory firedogs where never a log has blazed, and a seven-branched brass chandelier fitted with candles—beneath which, alas! electric bulbs—jarring discord!—Finally, rough-hewn chairs and ponderous tables. Through this décor drift, unhurried and serene, Dutchwomen from sundry provinces, sporting curious and fetching coiffures. One wears a golden casque, low-crowned, gripping the temples and knotted with great wings of muslin trimmed with lace, rustling and aflutter at the merest movement; spiral filigree drops tinkle at her ears; the remainder of her costume scarcely merits mention.

Innocent of the rudiments of French, young and comely, though nearly all afflicted with weak eyes (the climate?), these serving maids enquire by gesture alone, neither uttering nor comprehending so much as a syllable: request cold cocoa, they fetch it scalding; but what of it? At least they're spared the vulgar pleasantries that sundry oafs consider themselves entitled to inflict upon them.

And one muses, as the cocoa cools, one dreams of that mist-veiled Zeeland, silver beneath wan sunshine, those torpid canals bearing Meuse, Scheldt, and Rhine to their nuptials in the grey-green embrace of the North Sea, those tawny islands dotted with windmills and grazing herds, that hushed Flushing so wretchedly rendered in those pieces where Monsieur Rodenbach deposits his flaccid impressions.

Need I describe the Hungarian restaurant? The sauces are delectable, though why the conductor felt obliged to sport those preposterous soft boots with (of all things!) gilt spurs remains a mystery. And such an obsession with the Marseillaise and Italianate clamour! I should prefer rather more czardas.

The *Marseillaise* is a splendid institution—Revolutionary memories, et cetera; Monsieur Bourget, who in his preface to *Le Disciple* invokes the spirit of the volunteers of '92, must be delighted: the Exposition fairly rings with it from every quarter—but dash it all, we are at peace, and Monsieur von Bismarck, that subtle gentleman, might well take exception to such incessant cries of "Aux armes, citoyens!" As for the Italian cacophony, I venture we've all had quite our fill, have we not?

Here the six o'clock gun "tolls curfew" (this flourish isn't mine; I return it to one Monsieur F***, who trotted it out in a recent *Figaro* supplement; having no taste for such daringly metaphorical prose, I shall merely observe that the cannon signals the galleries' closure; and curfew at six? Never, not even in the darkest medieval times, did night fall so early in July).

Should you fancy dining at the Eiffel Tower, you'll find, besides sundry Brébants, an Alsatian-Lorraine brasserie (French beer throughout, and worthless at that!). There, moderately attractive young women, topped with the traditional headdress—a black silk butterfly—and sporting costumes that were never Alsatian, still less Lorrainian, perform the service. These demoiselles comprehend French admirably—witness the one who, to a gentleman accosting her in textbook German whilst pinching her arm, retorted most elegantly: "Sod off, you beast!"—and in the purest Montmartre accent!

Later, one does well to drift towards where a monstrous cannon trains its muzzle, menacing pensive foreigners and fervent patriots alike, one of those masterworks of military engineering that spontaneously inspire the refrain:

Ah! qu'on est fier d'être Français
Quand on voit le canon de Bange ! . . .

[Ah! how proud one is to be French
When one beholds the Bange[15] cannon!]

There, cheek by jowl with a brasserie staffed by lady musicians got up as Hungarian hussars, stands a café utterly at odds with the Exposition's *prevailing propriety.*

This café, I confess, enchants me, where murals strike an exotic chord not without twilight charm: a palm's slender silhouette rises against horizons of placid waters and muted verdure; kelp-gatherers scramble down sun-struck rocky slopes; cliffs shimmer, waves coruscate; amid encroaching blue shadows, negresses crouch or stand hieratic, gazing into distance. Martinique, I fancy; other canvases prove less commendable.

But the establishment's true curiosity and allure lies in one Princess Dolgorouki—so the placard proclaims—who directs, with droll incompetence, an orchestra of lady violinists. Russians of doubtful provenance, plus a gentleman wedded to his cornet. Ah! Princess, are you familiar with those Chantilly tapestries where remarkable she-apes conduct themselves as eighteenth-century courtiers? There's bathing, hunting, card-playing, and whatnot—Princess Babiole inflaming Prince Magot, yet altogether dignified and in no wise compromising the solemnity of those apartments where the Duc d'Aumale[16] promenades his verdant academician's palms, fresh from exile, his moustaches still damp with Jules Simon's[17] kisses.

Thus, Princess, on that thundery afternoon when I sat musing, disheartened by the crowd's good cheer, nauseated by dust and Viennese waltzes—which you served up, alas, in excess!—you appeared to me as compensation, not beautiful, no, but possessed of such simian grace. There you were—the platform low, white cravat, the motley of attendant skirts—you alone erect, conducting with fantastical windmill gestures. Sleeves flung back, violin at shoulder, and away!—you so Babiole, so Angola—*The Blue Danube*. Those head-tosses, the kokoshnik[18] askew, the mourning of your violently kohl-darkened brows zigzagging across your milk-white blonde's complexion. Thus, whilst the crowd hummed, smugly amused by your eccentricity, you, so thoroughly farcical—as my distinguished colleague Francisque Sarcey[19] would say—you whose sunburst chignon eclipsed the subtle murals, Princess, you became for me, in one glorious instant, almost the emblem of those who—sincerely, ah! sincerely—amid the crude guffaws of this quotidian beer-hall, play themselves mad waltzes in starbursts, rockets, cascades, responding to their souls' polychrome—you know the sort: those indefinite beings we call poets.

Now I must tender a confession: that description of the premises where Van Houten's cocoa diffused its delectable aromas was a paid advertisement! The sole occasion on which I prostituted my pen to commerce. And mark my cynicism: I regret it not one whit, for the cocoa was superb, the establishment genuinely agreeable, and the serving maids perfectly charming.

So there we were, wandering—a poet friend and I—through the Exposition galleries. Our finances were desperately straitened; between us we commanded but one handsome forty-sou piece. This penury cast us into deep melancholy, and we pondered how to procure dinner at that Hungarian restaurant whose ragouts had so pleased our palates some days previous.

Confronting the cocoa establishment, I proposed: "Let's each take a cup. That's twenty-four sous. We'll retain sixteen for contingencies."

Thus we proceeded. We were savouring with the deliberate leisure of those who cannot repeat the indulgence, sipping the scalding, velvety liquid, when inspiration struck.

"Mark that grave personage," I told my friend, "who surveys the moral order with cold faience-blue eyes. Note how he stands, arms folded against the clock—clearly a figure of consequence in

cocoa's destiny. Well then, I shall approach him and propose, for suitable remuneration, an advertisement in *La Vogue*."

My friend expressed scepticism regarding my scheme's prospects. Yet intuition whispered I should prevail upon the cocoa magnate. Rising, I drew him aside and marshalled my most persuasive rhetoric to convince him of the signal advantages of having a poet extol his product in a symbolist journal. The proposition initially nonplussed him. He ventured certain objections, promptly countered. At length he capitulated, produced a hundred-franc note from his pocket, and when I proffered a receipt, graciously observed that, as he himself versified in Dutch during idle hours, he should scruple to mistrust a fellow craftsman.

Ah! that banknote proved ephemeral! We demolished quantities of *paprikash* at the Hungarian restaurant; we quaffed legendary potions from exotic vessels; we showered gold upon the Javanese kampong[20] dancers; we investigated, for modest baksheesh, the charms of the Rue du Caire's almées... In sum, upon departing the Exposition, we possessed, as upon entering, precisely one handsome forty-sou piece.

Returning to *La Vogue*, I should note that despite our fundamental accord, it occasioned certain disputes over minutiae. One of the fiercest concerned the order of precedence in the review's pages and, consequently, the table of contents. Kahn, who harboured ambitions of leading a school, had stipulated perpetual pride of place. Vielé-Griffin, who contributed his exquisite poem *La Ronde de la Marguerite* to our July number, vehemently challenged this privilege. He demanded rotation of the leading position. We convened to thrash out this weighty matter; with none yielding, I foresaw symbolism fragmenting for want of a *modus vivendi* to accommodate all vanities. Besides, I've never mustered enthusiasm for such rivalries. After all, if a poem has merit, how does placement on page twenty rather than page one diminish its worth?

I therefore delivered a brief pacific address. I commenced by declaring myself hors de combat, being resolved to consign my own poems invariably to the issue's end. I then suggested to Kahn that assuming the magisterial mantle ill suited him, given that our movement's very essence was irreducible individualism. Finally, I proposed determining placement by lot for each number's submissions. This stratagem won acceptance, albeit with grumbling. The debate concluded with Kahn's memorable declaration, which sent us into paroxysms: "You young Aryans," he pronounced, "lack all sense of discipline."

He himself brooked no regimentation whatsoever. Moreover, his years were hardly numerous. Yet a phrase in some Aurélien Scholl[21] piece, styling him "Old Master," had gone straight to his head.

Alas, our lottery system never saw implementation. Three numbers had appeared: July, August, September. I was delivering October's copy to the printer when I found the premises shuttered. The concierge, a veritable Madame Cibot[22], broke the catastrophe to me sans ceremonie. Arcturus, excessively absorbed in spirits gambolling through his astral atmosphere to mind mundane affairs, had been declared bankrupt. The tarot having assured him of treasure in some Memphis hypogeum[23] sufficient to satisfy creditors, he had decamped for Egypt... Farewell, *La Vogue*! It enjoyed resurrection under Tristan Klingsor[24] and Henri Degron in 1899. It expired again last year. Perhaps another incarnation awaits...

As it stood under Kahn and Retté, it remains an invaluable document, containing poems and articles wherein symbolist doctrine found its most rigorous exposition and application.

Note to scholars: scarcely fifty copies circulate in the entire world.[25]

ART ET CRITIQUE

Art et Critique, the weekly review founded, as I mentioned earlier, by Jean Jullien, was housed in the narrow, sunless rue des Cannettes, in low-ceilinged quarters where every room, the director's office included, drowned in dank gloom. Nothing symbolic about this state of affairs, however—quite the reverse, in fact, for the review championed an aesthetic both expansive and luminous.

The review launched at much the same time as *La Vogue*, though in an altogether different spirit. Its battleground was the theatre, where it fought for the triumph of realism. It advanced the theories that Antoine's dramatists were putting into practice. It crossed swords with the Sarceys, the Vitus, the Fouquiers and other paladins of the comedy of crossed wires and the puppet-theatre drama à la Sardou. The contemporary master under whose banner they rallied was Henri Becque, author of *La Parisienne* and *Les Corbeaux*. Jean Jullien set forth his ideas with the sturdy frankness that has won him the esteem of all who value sincerity. He was then preparing his splendid drama *La Mer*, subsequently staged at the Odéon and withdrawn after fifty performances. The public had applauded; but the critics named above, spurred by grudges and interests best left unexamined, demanded the director sacrifice it to them.

It was in *Art et Critique*, too, that Paul Masson, better known as Lemice-Terrieux, launched his review of press howlers that put so many journalists' noses out of joint.

Our introduction to Jean Jullien came about in rather peculiar fashion. Henri Gauthier-Villars—Willy, as he was known—had published in *Art et Critique* a piece on *Joies*, Francis Vielé-Griffin's verse collection. Certain barbs he ventured stung our hot-tempered collaborator to the quick. Hence this squib in *La Vogue*: "The rather ponderous witticism ventured by a critic in M. Jullien's review, who saw fit to charge M. Vielé-Griffin with overworking the verb *éperler* in his book *Joies*, in its ichthyological guise as *éperlant* [smelt], proves yet again that critics don't read—the participle in question appears not even once in the entire volume."

Whereupon Jean Jullien wrote to me in my capacity as editorial secretary—a letter half-irritated, half-amiable, pointing out that *Art et Critique* was not his review but a forum where anyone might champion their views, even when these ran counter to realism. He closed by inviting us to contribute.

Greatly touched by this courtesy, I called on him. His reception was everything one could wish; and from that day forward we enjoyed a friendship that endures to this hour and of which I remain proud—for I hold the author of *Le Maître* and *La Poigne* to be not merely a distinguished dramatist but a man of sterling character.

By this time *La Vogue* had folded, as I've already recounted. *Art et Critique* undertook to serve our twenty-seven subscribers, and we became frequent contributors. Gustave Kahn reviewed M. Anatole France's *Thaïs*. Writing as Alaric Thomes, Vielé-Griffin laid out his conception of symbolism

and, in a rather barbed piece, demonstrated that M. Rollinat, author of *Les Névroses* and *Dans les Brandes*, deserved on every count to inspire, as indeed he did, the admiration of Albert Wolff. I myself published various reviews, including the first article to appear in France on Maurice Maeterlinck, occasioned by *La Princesse Maleine*. The piece was generous in its praise and ran to considerable length. I mention it here because it preceded by well over a year M. Octave Mirbeau's pistol shot in *Le Figaro*.

It was therefore rather overstating matters to claim, as M. Mirbeau inevitably did, that "no one was more utterly unknown than Maeterlinck."

Perhaps there was also some overstatement in declaring that "M. Maurice Maeterlinck has given us the most inspired work of our age, the most extraordinary and the most ingenuous as well, comparable—indeed superior—in beauty to the finest things in Shakespeare."

But M. Mirbeau has never been one for half-measures. Had he been, he might have paused before burying Maeterlinck beneath such crushing praise. He might have returned to his Shakespeare and reminded himself that the Bard encompasses all humanity; he might have hesitated to rank alongside him a poet—admirable certainly, and one I esteem as highly as anyone—whose work, for all its merits, simply hasn't the sweep and compass of that titan who gave us *Hamlet* and *The Tempest*. None of which detracts from M. Mirbeau's very real gifts. His novels contain, amongst needless squalor, passages of genuine beauty; his play *Les Affaires sont les affaires* has real power. Moreover, he repeatedly succeeded in bringing deserving artists out of obscurity, often in the teeth of editorial incomprehension. For this we must forgive him his enthusiasm for the grey, glutinous verses of the late Rodenbach, his juvenile hyperbole, his Captain Fracasse posturing, and the general chaos of his aesthetic principles...

It was at the offices of *Art et Critique* that I first encountered the painter Maurice Denis. He had been contributing art criticism to the review under a pseudonym and now brought in a series of drawings inspired by Verlaine's *Sagesse*. Most curious drawings they were. Already one could detect that wan, serpentine, studiously archaic Christianity that M. Denis would later make his trademark. The artist was eager to meet Verlaine. I took him round to the poet's lodgings—a gloomy house in the rue de Vaugirard, near the Odéon. Verlaine was gratified enough that his verses had prompted illustrations. But I could see that M. Denis's art, with its morbid sinuosities, hardly thrilled him; indeed, the only compliment he could muster was: "This landscape looks exactly like the countryside round Arras." Yet M. Denis had freighted every last stroke with symbolic significance and had shunned, as if it were blasphemy, any hint of working from life.

Before long, however, *Art et Critique* began to flag, and unmistakable portents announced its approaching end. However selfless, however devoted to art writers may be, they cannot indefinitely sustain a journal against the combined forces of journalists who command attention in direct proportion to their obtuseness, and the public's ingrained suspicion of anything new. New movements establish themselves only through sheer accumulation of ventures, one built upon another. So *Art et Critique* went under. Fortunately, three journals were taking shape that would prove more durable and that survive, albeit transformed, to this day: *La Plume*, under Léon Deschamps, where Jean Jullien assumed the mantle of drama critic; the *Mercure de France*, erected on the ruins of *La Pléiade* by Alfred Vallette, Louis Dumur, Rémy de Gourmont, Édouard Dubus, Albert Aurier and others; and *L'Ermitage*, directed by Henri Mazel, Adolphe Retté, and René Boylesve—who had not yet brought himself to shed his family name of Tardivaux.

I shall have more to say about these three reviews, for they exerted a decisive influence on the destiny of symbolism.

The Dead and the Lost

When I turn to survey the ground covered by the Symbolists, I find more than just the dead leaves I've been discussing. Through a mist of melancholy, I glimpse the phantoms of those who set out with us, crowned with hope and ablaze with lyricism, only to fall or veer away before the art they served so ardently could triumph.

Paris, that cruel mistress to the poor, killed some of them outright. Others bore fate's mark from the start. Sensing, perhaps, their time was short, they spent their youth like spendthrifts at every crossroads. They burned like torches flickering violet and gold amongst those fantastical, dreamlike celebrations where some of us sought to trick our deep-seated sorrow and transform a dismal reality.

Others still, answering a higher calling, forsook literature to seek in mysticism the wellspring that might slake their thirst for the absolute.

This book aims to capture a generation of poets, so I must raise—if only a modest memorial—to some of these departed souls. They fell in the thick of battle; all the more reason to preserve their memory within my powers.

I shall speak, then, of Édouard Dubus, Albert Aurier, and Emmanuel Signoret, who are dead, and of Louis Le Cardonnel, who took holy orders.

ÉDOUARD DUBUS

En mes rêves où règne une magicienne,
Cent violons mignons, d'une grâce ancienne,
Vêtus de bleu, de rose, et de noir plus souvent,
Viennent jouer parfois, on dirait pour le vent,
Des musiques de la couleur de leur costume
Mais où pleurent de folles notes d'amertume
Que la Fée, une fleur aux lèvres, sans émoi
Écoute longuement se prolonger en moi
Et dont je garde souvenir, pour lui complaire,
En maint joyau voilé d'ombre crépusculaire,
Qu'orfèvre symbolique et pieux je sertis
À sa gloire, quand les violons sont partis.

[In dreams where dwells a sorceress of mine,
A hundred dainty violins, of grace antique and fine,
Clad in blue, in rose, but black most frequently,
Come sometimes to play—for the wind, apparently—
Music that mirrors their costume's shade
Yet weeps with wild notes of bitterness inlaid,
Which the Fay, flower at lip, without dismay
Hears lingering long in me as they play,
And whose memory I preserve, for her delight,
In many a twilight-veiled jewel bright,

Which I, symbolic goldsmith, set with care
To honour her, when the violins aren't there.]

These verses, with their wistful gaiety, capture Édouard Dubus's essence perfectly. *Quand les violons sont partis*—the title of a slim volume now practically unobtainable—contained all the yearnings, regrets, and tenderness of the sentimentalist lurking beneath his mask of scepticism and mockery.

He wrote them for a young woman who sent quite a number of us into poetic delirium. Her real name was Louise Lacour, but steeped in romanticism from mingling with so many poets, she'd taken the pseudonym Diana Morello. Pretty she was not, strictly speaking. Yet small and serpentine as a grass snake, blessed with silk-smooth skin that radiated electric currents, she bewitched anyone who'd known her naked between the sheets. Accompanied by a buxom blonde calling herself Aline—whom I'd dubbed the Queen of Golconda and who claimed to have bedded M. François Coppée—Diana haunted Symbolist circles. Capricious in love, she seemed bent on outdoing a certain Polish Muse who collected poets with remarkable tenacity.

For all that, Diana Morello lavished upon us the fire of her slightly squinting black eyes. Those she welcomed to her ever-open bed found her devilishly hard to forget. Thus she inspired Édouard Dubus. She's also the Wicked Queen in Stuart Merrill's *Fastes*, the Hecate of my *Trois dialogues nocturnes*, and the Titania of *Une belle Dame passa*.

Yet Diana Morello wasn't Dubus's only love. A born seducer and charmer who laced his courtship with preposterous witticisms, he conquered virtually any woman he desired. Which didn't prevent him, in his darker moods, from declaring:

Je suis un piano cassé
Parce qu'il a trop amusé.

[I am a piano broken down—
Too much playing's done me in.]

Tall and lean, buttoned into immaculate frock coats, he moved through life with a pallid, clean-shaven face reminiscent of Watteau's Gilles, punctuated by small eyes that glittered with wit—the left one sporting a monocle.

Verlaine, who thought highly of him, wrote in his entertaining *Mômes-Monocles* series: "Quicksilver-swift and chattering like a brook verging on a torrent, he's a natural duellist, an amorous soul, a thoroughbred poet, and a reporter when time permits. The beauties of Montmartre and the Quarter—every last one—hold no mysteries for him: their boudoirs echo with his sonnets, fired by the purest symbolism; their hands and feet blush pink from his kisses, to say nothing of their other charms and his further attentions. A Don Juan with three eyes, a pasha with countless... hearts!"

In the mundane world, Dubus sampled the most varied careers. For a spell he fancied himself a Bonapartist, contributing to Prince Jérôme's *Aigles impériales*. Then he unleashed quasi-revolutionary wit at Mme Séverine's *Cri du Peuple*. As a lawyer, he set up shop in a working-class neighbourhood. Later he

joined the Bar, pleading under Maître Desplats, now a city councillor. At his death, he was clerking at the Interior Ministry, where M. Huysmans had secured him a post.

These jobs kept body and soul together, but they hardly stirred his blood. At the first opportunity, he'd flee offices and courtrooms to rejoin his fellow poets. He embraced Symbolism with passion, whilst championing traditional prosody. This sparked fierce debates where he'd thunder against free verse while we trampled the sacred cow of rich rhyme. But these quarrels never cut too deep; they'd dissolve in cascades of jokes where Dubus's comic genius shone supreme.

Other nights we'd roam the city till all hours. We'd trade Baudelaire's verses, drift together across metaphysics' frozen seas, or bemoan the treacheries of the perfidious Hecate—unless he was recounting the amorous adventures of another mistress, whom he'd christened with the solar name Hélias. This young woman, flame-haired with breasts like succulent pears, made a habit of selling her charms to archdukes, hospodars, and Spanish grandees. In her leisure hours, she permitted Dubus to love her. But he, craving fidelity, would rage with jealousy and call her a "despot's whore."

After sufficient philosophising, declaiming, aesthetic theorising, or soul-searching, we'd stage some outrageous prank for light relief.

One evening, having conspired beforehand, we stroll into a brasserie, order two beers, then sitting side by side, proceed to play a four-handed piece on the marble table as though it were an Erard grand. We perform the entire prelude to *Parsifal* in perfect mime.

The other patrons gape in alarm. Waiter and manager repeatedly attempt to stop us—to no avail. We remain immovable, departing only when the piece concludes, all without breathing a word.

I could recount countless such episodes. But remembering the wretched manner of Dubus's death, I've lost all appetite for recalling his jests and the hoaxes he played so brilliantly.

The true architect of Dubus's demise was the late Stanislas de Guaita. This parlour occultist didn't merely dabble in esoteric arts. He was a morphine fiend who compulsively recruited his friends to share his fatal passion. When Dubus called on him seeking material about Apollonius of Tyana, he fell into the trap. He became a slave to the Pravaz syringe[26], and his deterioration was swift. The drama he'd planned about the wonder-worker's life—which, judging from the few lines he recited to me, promised greatness—remained unwritten. Twice, thrice, he entered hospitals only to emerge and plunge deeper into his addiction. Then one day he collapsed in the street, paralysed, just as a substantial inheritance had freed him from want. They carried him to La Charité[27], where he died without regaining consciousness. He was thirty-two.

The fatal flaw that undid Dubus was laid bare by Louis Dumur, as close a friend as I, in an obituary for the *Mercure de France*: "He went through life undefended. He indulged every impulse, however dangerous, carrying his 'why bother?' philosophy to the point of self-destruction, mocking everything he held dear and himself above all."

Precisely so. Yet Dubus knew how to love. Poor Suzanne Gay realised this too late, when she tried to save him.

ALBERT AURIER

Here was a giant of sorts, broad in the shoulder, sonorous of voice, joyous of laugh. Sporting a flat-brimmed topper rammed down to his ears and muffled in a fur-collared overcoat, he would traverse Paris in great strides, wielding his right hand like a bat with which to thwack his ideas onto the obdurate skulls of the bourgeoisie.

His quarters in the rue Lepic, Montmartre, comprised three poky rooms crammed with a profusion of paintings—adorning the walls, crowding the furniture, leaning against the panelling. The finest of these canvases bore the signature of Vincent Van Gogh, another who died terribly young, in an asylum. This painter, whose unsteady temperament could drive him to the most outlandish daubs, would quite as often produce works that approached genius. His hypertrophied vision led him to record colour symphonies of matchless radiance.

Aurier possessed, amongst others, a landscape of Van Gogh's showing a stand of tall poplars in a sunlit meadow aflame with poppies. It was composed with an innate mastery of effect, painted with a brio that compelled admiration.

Novelist, poet and art critic, Aurier demonstrated in these diverse fields a talent already confident in its powers. His first novel, *Vieux*, depicted in vivid, sinewy, evocative prose the debauches and dissolution of a widower in his fifties haunting the brothels and fleshpots of Paris. The book contained scenes of remarkable vitality, a knack for marrying the comic and the macabre, and felicities of expression that presaged what Aurier might have given us had he lived.

Early on, he had also brought out a little weekly whose title eludes me, which earned him a conviction for offending public morals. Needless to say, Aurier had offended nothing whatsoever. He had merely permitted himself to lampoon the treacly novels of one Jules de Glouvet, better known in politics as Quesnay de Beaurepaire. This overheated Prudhomme, who would later cut such an absurd figure in the Dreyfus affair, was then Prosecutor General. He accordingly pressed that engine of iniquity called the Penal Code into the service of his literary vendettas. Thus it was that, on the pretext of publishing a rather torrid love poem, Aurier was slapped with a fine that spelled the end of his journal.

As an art critic, Aurier left studies that betray an artistic sensibility rich with promise. Admittedly, carried away as we all were by the urge to discover painters pursuing a revolution analogous to our own literary endeavours, he sometimes rendered verdicts of excessive generosity. Thus in an article entitled "Des murs, des murs!", he proposed entrusting the decoration of the Panthéon and sundry other Parisian monuments to M. Gauguin. Yet M. Gauguin, a painter more singular than admirable, never demonstrated he was equal to such a colossal commission.

Aurier cared less for the neo-impressionists—those painters of the tiny dot who practise what M. Arthur Byl calls fly-speck-ism. He gave due credit to the rough-hewn art of M. Maximilien Luce, though compromised by dubious methods. He valued the sometimes luminous and exquisitely toned painting of Seurat, whilst lamenting that the artist had succumbed to the pernicious influence of M. Charles Henry, going so far as to agree with that abstraction-addled theorist that an ascending line

drawn left to right expresses sadness whilst a descending line drawn right to left expresses gaiety. Seurat possessed, in any case, too much individuality not to break free eventually from this nonsensical aesthetic. Had he lived, he would undoubtedly have delivered the splendid paintings that certain of his seascapes already augured, despite their doctrinaire spirit.

But there was one neo-impressionist painter whose pretensions stuck in Aurier's craw: M. Signac. This young fellow, utterly persuaded of his own genius, styled himself a chef d'école. Yet nothing in his canvases bore out the qualities he claimed with a conceit almost endearing in its artlessness. M. Signac fancied his Mediterranean paintings apt to convey that riot of colour the southern sun sparks from wave and rock. Nothing could be further from the mark. As I once observed in this connection: "M. Signac believes he has captured the prism on canvas. But examine them closely —they might have been painted by a Neanderthal on a North Sea strand during the great autumn rains."

Aurier justly opposed to these ham-fisted efforts the decorative art of Messieurs Sérusier, Bonnard and Vuillard, who have made good on their youthful promise.

But his keenest insight emerged in his writings on Claude Monet. He was amongst the very first, if not the first, to champion the luminous art of that magnificent painter.

I recall that whilst pondering his Monet study, he said to me: "I've settled on this title: *le Prêtre du Soleil*. You'll see—I'll capture the essence of that scintillating, sun-drenched painting."

The article proved remarkable indeed. Aurier, who worshipped light, brilliant hues and prismatic effects, wrote there, in the finest pantheistic vein, of the genuinely solar art at which Monet excelled. Others have since given this painter his due: Gustave Geffroy, M. Georges Clemenceau who devoted a splendid piece to him. But Aurier bestowed the perfect epithet: *the Priest of the Sun*...

Another sphere in which Aurier proved himself master was the taming of police constables when they presumed to stop him disturbing the slumber of Paris. In his night-prowlings, he was given to emitting bellowings of varying harmoniousness that scandalised the Prefect's underlings. Hence the run-ins, the actual tussles even, from which our friend nearly always emerged triumphant.

One night, though, matters took an ugly turn. My adoptive son, Henri Degron, embarking on his literary career, had deemed it fitting to mark this epochal occasion with a banquet over which his mentors in the poetic lists would preside. In attendance: Léon Deschamps, editor of *La Plume*; Stuart Merrill, who had brought two Englishmen of whom he knew only that they revered Swinburne; Louis Le Cardonnel; the composer Quittard; Dauphin-Meunier, who has since forsaken poetry for militant nationalism; Frédéric Corbier, polyglot mathematician, who died most wretchedly some years later; our Albert Aurier, naturally; plus sundry nonentities.

Degron received us in a hotel room that would have been tight for four, into which we packed fifteen. Japanese lanterns aglow swung from the ceiling; tortoises browsed on lettuce leaves about the floor. The bed was commandeered by a cat who had littered the previous day and was suckling her brood. This staging met with huge approval. We wedged ourselves in as we could: one on a chair, another on a trunk, three on the eiderdown beside the feline family; the rest hunkered down on the floorboards. The feast commenced: we consumed charcuterie and pastries; we quaffed champagne and quantities of liqueurs, garnished with the most extraordinary repartee. Hilarity mounted, the din

likewise, until by two in the morning we were roaring "God Save the Queen" in unison to prove to Merrill's two Britons that we knew how to make guests welcome. All the while, Louis Le Cardonnel, vanished beneath the table, would only pause in his raucous chanting of the *De Profundis* to wail: "Deschamps, I'm in hell... Drag me out!"

After we'd sung ourselves hoarse, someone proposed taking the air. We spilled tumultuously from the hotel near Montparnasse station and swept down the rue de Rennes, bawling the Ride of the Valkyries with full throat. Aurier marched alone, twenty yards ahead. He whirled his stick about and loosed such unearthly shrieks that two patrolling officers pounced on him, commanding silence. For answer, Aurier decked them both with superb punches. They scrambled up and attempted to haul him to the Saint-Sulpice station-house. But we charged forward and a mêlée erupted in which we should certainly have prevailed, had not a cloud of policemen descended, summoned by their comrades' distress signals.

The lot of us were frogmarched to the station and arraigned before a duty officer who demanded our particulars. Here Aurier was sublime. When this keeper of the nocturnal peace upbraided him for battering his subordinates, he retorted: "Sir, I was singing Wagner. I am aware of no statute forbidding it. Furthermore, I shall never suffer ruffians to lay hands upon my person."

The duty officer remained unmoved by his oratory. He booked us all; yet proved relatively indulgent, for we were discharged forthwith...

Soon after, Albert Aurier contracted the pneumonia that carried him off. We learnt with stunned disbelief that he had died after three days' illness.

What melancholy obsequies! The day was grey and clammy; rain came in sharp squalls. We wept, every one of us, watching them slide our friend's coffin into the wagon that would bear him to the little rural cemetery where he lies...

Great heart, great talent—Aurier would have amounted to something.

EMMANUEL SIGNORET

Signoret died at twenty-nine, leaving behind some of the most exquisite verses in which contemporary poetry takes pride. What killed him was not poverty—though he knew its bitter taste—nor illness, but rather, as one intimate observed, *the want of glory*. A precocious ripening had brought him almost to artistic perfection at an age when most writers are still groping for their voice. While such mastery commanded admiration, one sensed that so abundant and dazzling a bloom could not endure.

André Gide, whose judgements often strike true, penned a clear-sighted and vindicating piece on Signoret from which I gladly draw these lines: "In its beauty, too swiftly perfected and complete, Signoret's work troubled us: it trespassed upon his life... Beauty, life, works—these were, let us say, things accomplished. Death will alter nothing in his verses. Life could have added nothing... If not blind

to earthly matters like Homer, he was at least so remarkably short-sighted that never did reality's ugliness or infirmity collide—as it does so searingly in Baudelaire—with the poetic vision through which he moved in dreams. However awkward, fumbling and hampered his progress through the streets, his flight soared robust, serene, assured. What others term inspiration, the Muse's visitation—from which certain poets emerge spent and limping, like Jacob after wrestling the angel—was for him the permanent, natural state. So much so that whatever drew him from it, life's urgent material demands, became agents of his sickness and undoing." Indeed, Signoret traversed daily existence—mercifully—without perceiving it. While he hauled his ailing frame through the streets, meanly dressed in wretched clothes, while poor sight sent him blundering into walls and passers-by, his spirit spread luminous wings beneath the vaulted halls of liquid azure where his gods resided. Sovereign rhythms sang him endless hymns to Beauty; magnificent visions shimmered round him. Never has lyric rapture ventured further.

Towns and countryside, transformed through his genius's prism, became stage-sets where his dreams caught fire. He catalogued them fondly, *forgetting* he had starved there. Nothing reveals this more tellingly than this passage from the preface to *Vers dorés*, glorifying those places where the Muse smiled upon him: "It was at Aix-en-Provence, that city rich with sweet shadows where buildings with radiant façades rise into beautiful light. It was beside Savoy's lakes, upon the Alps' stupendous heights. It was in Paris, that celebrated city where a mighty river flows and lovely prospects ring it round: Saint-Denis where royal dust reposes; Meudon ablaze with roses and Saint-Cloud with its forests..."

This supreme gift—to clothe all things in splendour—struck him as unremarkable. Just as thinking and dreaming *above life* came naturally to him, so he regarded his verses as exemplars ranking him with the masters. This artless pride—warranted, after all—prompted him to declare in the preface to *La Souffrance des Eaux*: "Through patient, sublime endeavour, I have lifted my thought to the immortal, singular form. This new work cannot but rouse enthusiastic champions. Goethe wrought nearly as sweeping transformations upon his *Iphigenia* and his *Torquato Tasso.*

"I have unlearnt forever constraint and pain. My consciousness shares in the whole of life. I have cast off every partial method. I have caught Nature's own secret modes of utterance."

And sending me this volume, he wrote: "Accept these blazing poems from your friend, so lyrical that you shall salute in him wisdom complete and exuberant—the wisdom of life! Beauty dwells here. Her presence, in our age, is a fearsome fact. We, as free men, must acclaim her."

Some may smile at these magnificent pronouncements and write off such faith in one's genius as megalomania. They would be mistaken. The sheer fact that in our epoch, swarming with withered bourgeois and rank politicians, a poet should have lifted himself with sublime thrust to the luminous spheres of pure Beauty, there to sing in perpetual harmonic reverie, amounts to a miracle we ought to contemplate with awe.

Yet Signoret occasionally intuited, particularly near the end, that his art, though prized by poets, was not reaching the crowd. Born to be Pindar to a race of heroes, he endured in such moments all the torments of isolation.

André Gide equally well captured his mood in these lapses: "One day," he recounts, "I met him at Cannes; I reproached him for not producing more. 'Me, I'm always ready,' he answered; 'I'm waiting for someone to commission something.'"

Alas, he waited in vain. And failing to secure the glory he knew himself worthy of, he finally succumbed to despair. Futilely he told himself:

Je ne veux pas mourir, la vie est douce et grande :
J'ai vu sur l'amandier verdir la jeune amande
Et les fruits du pêcher s'enfler comme des seins.
Muses, vous soutenez mes plus hardis desseins :
Ma parole de feu vous l'avez enfantée
Pour qu'elle soit enfin des races écoutée...

[I will not die—life is sweet and grand:
I've watched the almond's young green fruit expand
And seen the peaches swell like breasts new-grown.
Muses, you uphold my boldest plans:
These words of fire you birthed through me alone
That races yet to come might make them known…]

The chance to hymn life's savage nobility before applauding crowds never came... So he fell. One December evening, Death arrived and swept him beneath her sombre wing...

The worthy poet Paul Souchon, his most faithful friend, conjured Signoret's last days in one of the finest pieces in *Élégies parisiennes*:

La Provence reçut de nouveau son enfant,
La Provence et sa sœur, la divine Italie!
Il erra, ranimé, mais bientôt étouffant
Sous un poids de souffrance et de mélancolie.

[Provence received again her wandering son,
Provence and sister Italy divine!
He roamed, revived, yet soon could scarcely run,
Crushed beneath suffering and decline.]

Oh! l'horreur de ce temps où, frappé, Signoret,
Comme un aigle blessé qui recherche son aire,
Parcourait les chemins, les monts et les forêts
Et traînait avec lui son obscur adversaire.

[Oh horror of those days when stricken Signoret,
A wounded eagle seeking out its nest,
Crossed paths and peaks and forests in dismay,
Dragging his dark antagonist.]

Oh! la beauté des cris que jetait sa douleur
Et que son pur esprit, dans son front toujours calme,

Modelait sans faiblir, comme un parfait sculpteur
Qui voile son tombeau sous la rose et la palme.

[Oh beauty of the cries his anguish made,
Which his pure spirit, in his placid brow,
Shaped without wavering, as sculptors trade
Who shroud their tombs with rose and palm-bough.]

Un jour, il s'arrêta. C'était près de la mer.
Comprit-il que la mer serait douce à ses Mânes?
Son mal ne troubla pas le silence de l'air,
Il se tût — et sa tombe est au golfe de Cannes...

[One day he stopped. The sea was near.
Did he sense the waves would soothe his shade?
His suffering disturbed no silence here—
He fell quiet—in Cannes' gulf he's laid…]

Yes, his body has returned to the All, amongst the musical murmuring of waves he celebrated, amongst orange-blossom scent and the keening of winds that sweep down from the Alps. But his memory endures as the most prolific lyricist the nineteenth century's close produced. Let us therefore lavish upon him laurels and flowers.

LOUIS LE CARDONNEL

Le Cardonnel isn't dead—though the stubborn pagans most of us have become might well think him as good as dead, for he's gone and got himself ordained. Of course, this isn't the place for one of those harangues our modern Homais brigade so loves to deliver. Yet one can't help regretting that Le Cardonnel has abandoned poetry to swoon in ecstasy before the maudlin tribulations and vapid fantasies of the Galilean.

Around 1890, he was already severely afflicted with the mystical itch. Whenever he'd joined one of our conversations where we dissected the world with what some called cynical frankness—and especially after surrendering to the charms of some fetching tart—he'd suddenly turn morose and start spouting pious bromides that fell like ink splashed into a crystal spring.

The moment these scruples seized him, Le Cardonnel would declare: "I must purify myself of the sins committed in your damned company. Off to my confessor I go, to scrub clean this conscience you've all befouled."

And he meant every word. His remorse genuinely drove him to some retreat house where he'd spend days flagellating himself, rattling off rosaries and inhaling incense fumes.

The trouble was, he'd emerge revolted by the small-mindedness and sanctimonious loathing of art displayed by the church wardens and Children of Mary he'd been forced to endure. Our lyrical

blasphemy seemed, by contrast, the picture of health. He'd dismiss his patron, that Jesuit Saint Louis Gonzaga, as a crashing bore, and once again pay homage at the shrines of Venus Pandemos.

There was, however, one occasion when Le Cardonnel thought he'd found the formula for wedding Catholic devotions to the fevers of sublimated love. At a novena to Our Lady, he'd met a diminutive forty-year-old—thin, desiccated, and dark—whose enormous black eyes burned with what the poet mistook for the flame of divine union.

After the service, he approached her. As she lacked neither wit nor learning, she knew how to hold his interest, and soon they'd established relations—still platonic, mind you.

This dark little creature lived near the Jardin des Plantes in a flat cluttered with pious daubs and devotional gimcrackery. There she lured Le Cardonnel, plying him with dainty suppers that invariably featured celery salad with mustard, peppery bisques, and truffles.

Le Cardonnel, floating in clouds of the most ethereal mysticism, imagining himself virtually a Church Father whom Providence had blessed with a soul-sister, never suspected anything amiss in this parade of aphrodisiacs. But his friend knew exactly what she was about and, under the pretence of spiritual colloquy, meant to stoke in the poet fires rather more terrestrial than divine love.

One evening, after Benediction where they'd received the blessing of the Archbishop of Paris, Monseigneur Richard—whose grand manner and scarlet robes had quite bedazzled Le Cardonnel—the poet confided to the pious Estelle (for so the dark woman was called) that he felt irresistibly summoned to the priesthood. He would enter seminary, take his vows, then scale the Church's commanding heights. Indeed, he assured her, he had it in him to become a cardinal—why not Pope?

Estelle applauded warmly. Then, to pursue this thrilling topic more comfortably, she whisked him home where she'd prepared a peppery repast from which she expected great things.

While wolfing down these inflammatory provisions, Le Cardonnel grew drunk on dreams of the purple he already saw draped across his shoulders. Meanwhile Estelle drenched him in compliments, Chartreuse, and Benedictine. When she judged the future Pope sufficiently primed, she revealed herself as niece to Monseigneur Affre[28]—killed, as everyone knows, on the barricades in '48. She boasted of her connections in the upper clergy, swearing to place them at his ambitious service. Finally, from a display case she produced a mozetta[29] and pectoral cross[30], claiming them as relics of her uncle. She draped Le Cardonnel in the mozetta, hung the silver chain with its cross round his neck. Then, throwing herself at his feet, she confessed her wild passion and begged him to descend into her, exactly as if he were the Holy Spirit!

Le Cardonnel ought to have recited her Mallarmé's sonnet that begins with these lines, which Pierre Louÿs insists must be read erotically:

M'introduire dans ton histoire C'est en héros effarouché...

[To introduce myself into your story It's as a frightened hero...]

But while striking a hieratic pose in mozetta and cross, and despite feeling almost ungovernable stirrings of the flesh, he scolded Estelle and urged her to suppress temptation, just as he was doing. But this priestly, burning creature was past calming. She stripped naked, rolled on the bed with wild hair and raving eyes, and besieged her resistant prey with frenzied speeches mixing every species of mystical and

carnal entreaty. The poet, nevertheless, remained planted in his armchair, interrupting his skyward prayers only to repel—though without violence—Estelle's renewed assaults.

This went on all night—or so Le Cardonnel claimed. He swore his virtue emerged unscathed despite the monastic spirits, the aphrodisiac fare, and the dangerous liberties his would-be seductress attempted in her campaign to break him.

Come dawn, he fled, having first cursed Estelle as spawn of the infernal Lilith. He stalked across Paris still wearing the mozetta and cross, which made a decidedly droll ensemble with his mouse-grey jacket and soft felt hat. He talked aloud to himself, startling passers-by, repeating that after such a trial, his soul had strength enough to brave every peril strewn across the priestly path.

But one last humiliation awaited. The heat was murderous; Father Apollo was driving his blazing chariot through a cloudless sky. Offended, no doubt, that one of his children should desert his cult for Christianity's swamps, the god struck Le Cardonnel with a vibrating golden arrow.

In plain English, our friend got sunstroke—literally, not figuratively. His wits scattered, he turned up at the home of his host, the novelist Adrien Remacle, and fell into such convulsions that violent madness seemed inevitable. Since I had some influence over him, they sent for me. I found Le Cardonnel stark naked—except for the cross and mozetta he refused to surrender—ranting incoherently, alternating between curses against the demonic Estelle, whom he called an infamous Gnostic, and claims that Jesus Christ himself had made him cardinal.

Through his ravings, I gathered that when Apollo struck him down, he'd been working on a poem glorifying King Ludwig II of Bavaria. The verses he recited in his delirium seemed so beautiful that I resolved immediately to transcribe them, so that should he remain mad, those who justly admired his talent wouldn't be cheated of them.

So I sat down beside him, armed with pen, ink, and paper, and tried to extract the poem. The first two stanzas came easily. The rest proved trickier. Le Cardonnel would start a half-line, then break off to reel out absurd litanies. I'd gently steer him back to poetry. I noticed that whenever I managed to return him to the rhythmic track, clarity returned: he'd suggest corrections to his first draft and mark time with perfect precision.

True indeed that for a poet, poetry is the best medicine.

Finally, after three hours, the poem was complete. Since Le Cardonnel's verses have never been collected and these are among his finest, I give them below.

TO LUDWIG II OF BAVARIA

For Adolphe Retté

O you who, hastening fate's ineluctable law,
Embraced death in the waters deep and wide,
Though here below, Ludwig, you were king we saw,
Your kingdom was not of this world's side.

Supreme knight of legends painted azure-blue,
Obstinately faithful to their faded light,
You turned towards Arthur's cycle, lost from view,
With eyes of sea and melancholy's blight.

And it was like a moon's interior glow
That whitened your soul, O Ludwig, and the fey
Called you softly their lord of candid show,
You who loved only trophies far away.

Upon the hippogriff whose flanks revolt in vain,
Who strikes the evening with his wings of brass,
To ride towards woods where sleeping they remain—
Ancient kings your calling wakes at last.

And see upon abolished palace doors
That sovereign incantation does revive,
The ladies and the brave from memory's stores
Awaken, O their prince, to feasts alive.

A noble enchanter came who, through his art,
Restored to your soul its glorious domain,
The magician cursed by every heart
Gave you his work in scorn of hatred's stain.

You were, through his harmonies' accord,
Each noble knight that he could make appear,
Your soul that sought its body, long ignored,
Found itself splendid in drama's sphere.

The radiant Stranger whom the pure Elsa
Followed with nostalgic gaze when he took flight,
That was you: this child your heart saw—
Then departure with the swan of mystic might.

You were swept up by sabbath's winning call,
Spurring your horse through forests dark and grim,
The spirits and the night have taken all,
For shadows' provocation is no whim.

You whom they adored, they've made you bend,
You never knew the silent, burning truth
Of those whose souls with chastity blend,
You listened to the undine's cunning ruth.

And now, after so many dreams endured,
Perhaps, held prisoner by your burning Past,
You return when in your castles, long immured,
The peacocks' Valkyrian cry holds fast.

Once Le Cardonnel had calmed somewhat, I took him home, saw he got proper care, and kept him several days. Good God, what a handful! First, he required constant watching, as he dreamed only of escaping to race through the streets, preaching to Parisians and converting them to the most fanatical papism.

At night, sleep eluded him. I'd made up a bed on the divan in my study. Burning with fever, he'd leap from the sheets, invade my bedroom, and jolt me awake to confide, in a voice strangled with terror, that devils were torturing him, breathing fire on his skull and tearing at his limbs with pincers. I'd reassure him as best I could, put him back to bed, apply compresses, and recite verses from Virgil's *Bucolics* to calm him. The sublime harmonies of the great Latin poet, the gentle images they evoked, drove away his phantoms. He'd doze briefly. Then nightmares would wake him again and back he'd come, crying out.

Finally I resorted to a stratagem that worked. One evening, before putting him to bed, I took chalk and drew a pentacle on the floor. I told him this talisman had been revealed to me by a Magus, direct heir to King Solomon's secrets, and was infallible against evil spirits. Le Cardonnel believed me. From then on—his brain clearing daily in any case—he slept peacefully, and so did I.

Shortly after, a man of letters, Monsieur Alidor Delzan, who loved and admired Le Cardonnel, took him to the country. There he made a full recovery, and we all hoped he'd give us finer verses than ever. But the priestly calling wouldn't release him. He left for Rome, entered seminary, was tonsured and anointed with all the oils apparently essential to holy orders. Back in France, he was appointed curate to a parish near Valence, in the Midi.

I'm told he now composes odes to the Blessed Sacrament and that his parish priest, hostile to poetry, makes his life miserable. Still, if he truly continues writing verse, there's hope he'll one day shed the cassock and don again the starred purple of the lyric poets. I dearly hope so, for Le Cardonnel was a poet of the first rank. His musical verses, adorned with images as rare and suggestive as fabulous jewels, his feeling for mystery, make him one of Symbolism's brightest stars.

If he insists on obliterating himself at the Galilean's feet, let's hope some enterprising publisher will think to collect his poems in a volume.

It remains to say what became of Monseigneur Affre's relics. Adrien Remacle kept the mozetta. As for the pectoral cross, I gave it to a young lady of easy virtue who, good Catholic that she was, assured me it would bring her luck.

Mallarmé's Tuesday Evenings

When I embarked upon my campaign against the theories and influence of Stéphane Mallarmé, certain devotees of the poet, incensed by my efforts, put about some rather singular rumours concerning me. They claimed, for instance, that my persistent attacks on the author of *Le Guignon* and *Hérodiade* stemmed from his having shown me the door for my deplorable manners and want of courtesy. Here was a convenient, if scarcely honourable, means of explaining my position. I might write in my *Aspects*: "I feel, need it be said, no personal animosity whatever towards M. Mallarmé; I have only praise for my long acquaintance with him; I consider him the perfect gentleman, but as a writer I find him calamitous, and I deemed it my duty to demonstrate why." I might confine my criticism strictly to literary terrain[1]—all to no avail; several persisted, and perhaps persist still, in maintaining that nothing but my boorish resentment had driven me to it.

Others would say: "But you frequented Mallarmé's soirées, you published encomiums to his poems in your early days. Such an abrupt about-face can only spring from inconstancy of character."

I might have answered: "It is precisely because I attended Mallarmé's gatherings and studied his poetics—praising them initially, though with reservations—that now, with greater experience and having turned from such contrived art through my deepening love of nature, I find it beneficial both to myself and others to explain why this rhetorician's words and writings strike me as baneful."

Besides, now that a decade has elapsed since these controversies, one readily observes: firstly, that numerous Symbolists, abandoning the hazy spiritualism and hermetic art advocated by Mallarmé, have evolved towards nature or social art; secondly, that young writers who repudiate Mallarmé as a school leader merely rehash, in diluted form, my arguments of yesteryear.

Moreover, having published *Similitudes* and *La Forêt bruissante*, poems of altruistic inspiration, at a time when many Symbolists still barricaded themselves in that windowless Ivory Tower overlooking life, I venture to say—though I risk appearing self-satisfied—that I helped restore good sense and clarity to a literary movement that might otherwise have vanished into the starless night of abstraction. I cried "Beware!" to my confrères. Many heard me, even those who won't acknowledge it. I am therefore quite untroubled: sooner or later, some historian of letters will assess my contribution and render me my due.

That said, let us return to Mallarmé's receptions. They are justly celebrated, for it was during these gatherings that the poet most readily expounded his doctrine and glossed his verses and prose pieces to illuminate their meaning—which too often remained opaque even to his most devoted acolytes.

These acolytes speak of the Tuesday evenings with ecstasy. To read them, one would imagine that the rites observed in Mallarmé's salon were so transcendent that any uninitiated interloper would have crumbled to dust.

M. Remy de Gourmont calls Mallarmé "The much-beloved and providential poet". Does not this latter epithet suggest that for M. de Gourmont, Mallarmé played in literature a role analogous to Bonaparte's in society? Yet when one considers the meagre corpus the poet left behind—writings whose significance his partisans cannot even agree upon—when one recalls those causeries where fugitive dialectics contorted themselves beyond all contact with reality, one finds the comparison wanting in proportion. Still, M. de Gourmont's phrase merited quotation, for it strikes the keynote of the panegyrics his faithful heap upon Mallarmé.

M. Bernard Lazare writes in his *Figures Contemporaines*: "In time to come, those who heard him and treasured his words will recount his life as the good Xenophon recounted that of Socrates. They will explicate his sonnets line by line, with the sole aim of revealing to the young men of that future age what a noble, profound and wondrous artist Stéphane Mallarmé was."

Stirring words, these. Yet should M. Bernard Lazare ever undertake to gloss Mallarmé's discourse and verses, he would do well to remember a certain mishap that befell him during his assiduous attendance at the poet's salon.

One Tuesday evening, when M. Bernard Lazare found himself unable to partake of communion in the Mallarmean rite, he arranged to meet several fellow initiates around midnight, that they might convey the Master's teachings. One of these—an inveterate hoaxer (don't challenge me to name him)—devised a spurious Mallarmé sonnet from words thrown together at random, which he presented to M. Lazare with a request to divine its meaning, the Master having deferred his exegesis to the following Tuesday.

M. Lazare applied himself to the task and promptly delivered a commentary unveiling the thousand profound insights, the ten thousand imagistic splendours embedded in this beyond-pastiche... The hoaxer in question—who later branded me a zealot for questioning Mallarmé's genius—recounted the snare with considerable relish. I doubt he ever undeceived the author of *Figures contemporaines*.

Bernard Lazare was, in fact, rather frequently the dupe of such pranks. M. Henri Mazel has told me how, during a discussion of neo-Platonism, he presented him with an alleged passage from Plotinus, concocted by M. Paul Masson, requesting clarification of its import. Bernard Lazare duly discovered therein the most sublime philosophical beauties…

M. Albert Mockel, in his book *Stéphane Mallarmé: un Héros*, rhapsodises: "We passed unforgettable hours there, the finest, doubtless, we shall ever know; we witnessed there, amid all the graces and enchantments of discourse, that disinterested cult of ideas which is the religious joy of the mind. And he who received us thus was the absolute epitome of the poet, the heart that knows love, the intellect that knows understanding—inferior to nothing and disdaining nothing, for he perceived in each thing a secret lesson or an image of Beauty."

None can reproach me for stinting on space for Mallarmé's admirers and their effusions. Yet on re-reading them, an objection immediately presents itself. What—for years on end, the Master poured forth upon his disciples the treasures of a superior intelligence; he disclosed every secret of his doctrine, elucidated every refinement of his Word. And not one of them contrived to transmit even the essence of these vaunted conversations?

Indeed, examine the apologias for Mallarmé published in his lifetime or posthumously: you will discover thoroughly merited praise for the man's kindness and courtesy, rhapsodic phrases about the writer's genius; but you will uncover no precise indication of the fruits of this brain whose fecundity and range are so extolled.

This seems to me telling. For surely, had Mallarmé truly been one of those exceptional spirits who impress their stamp upon an entire generation, we should have been informed what his teachings comprised. Yet nothing of the kind has been furnished. Not one of his familiars has enlightened us on this score. And they were legion. Here is the roll, according to Mallarmé's biography in Messieurs Van

Bever and Léautaud's anthology *Poètes d'Aujourd'hui*, so invaluable for its accuracy: Édouard Dujardin, Théodore Duret, Félix Fénéon, René Ghil, Gustave Kahn, Jules Laforgue, Charles Morice, Henri de Régnier, Laurent Tailhade, Francis Vielé-Griffin, Charles Vignier, Teodor de Wyzewa, Paul Claudel, André Gide, Ferdinand Hérold, Pierre Louÿs, Camille Mauclair, Stuart Merrill, Jean de Mitty, John Payne, Marcel Schwob, Paul Valéry, et cetera, et cetera.

Nearly all these gentlemen have hymned Mallarmé in terms both nebulous and grandiloquent; M. de Gourmont has embroidered, apropos of him, elegant variations on the theme of decadence. But I repeat: no one has lucidly expounded his integral doctrine. Whence one may infer that Mallarmé's conversation induced in his admirers a sensation of voluptuous inebriation, of which they retained a blurred recollection without being able to reconstruct the particulars.

As for the masterwork they assured us—thrice weekly for a decade and more—would eclipse the art of all ages, Mallarmé never penned its opening line, nor was anything pertaining to it discovered among his posthumous papers.

In all likelihood, Mallarmé, having deceived himself about the scope of this poem—intended as a synthesis of music, literature and the plastic arts—found himself unequal to its execution. Yet the conception remained precious to him; and he never ceased, until his death, to fondle it and make its mirage dance before his disciples' eyes. In this, as in much else, he proved himself a man whose intentions bore no fruit.

For my part, it was precisely these celebrated conversations that first aroused my wariness of his influence. I attended the Tuesday gatherings with fair regularity throughout 1891 and 1892. I spoke little and observed much. I admired then, as I admire still, certain of the Master's poems from his early period—the fragment of *Hérodiade*, for instance, *Les Fenêtres*, *L'Azur*, *Le vierge, le vivace et le bel aujourd'hui*... and above all his magnificent translation, or rather transfiguration, of Edgar Poe. But my mind, perhaps too crude, already bridled at the gibberish into which the poet was sinking ever deeper...

We would pack ourselves onto chairs, armchairs and a settee in a modest salon that soon filled with clouds of tobacco smoke. Wreathed in this symbolic haze, Mallarmé would stand with his back to a large faience stove. Conversation proceeded slowly, portentously, all aphorisms and lapidary pronouncements. At times, vast silences lasting a quarter-hour would descend, during which the disciples doubtless pondered the Master's utterance, whilst I felt myself invaded by an uncanny chill, as though a cloak of ice were settling upon my shoulders.

M. de Régnier alone, whose delicately mordant wit is well known, would intermittently shatter the general glaciation with a shaft of humour that restored us to life. The others would then intone, in sepulchral voices, sundry phrases into which they endeavoured to compress whole worlds of thought. And Mallarmé, smiling, would draw three puffs from his pipe—in lieu of conclusion. Amongst these petrified beings, some achieved still greater petrification. Take the clean-shaven, close-cropped young fellow who attended every Tuesday for two years without pronouncing a single syllable. One evening, he ceased to appear. Mallarmé enquired: "Why do we no longer see that gentleman who listened so beautifully? Is he known to anyone?"

The company consulted one another with glances; an informal census revealed that no one knew him, that he had addressed no one, and that it was understood only vaguely that he was connected with Rodin.

Or consider M. Hugues Rebell, that literary firebrand and provocateur, exuberant and robust in his splendid book *La Nichina*, yet in daily life the mildest and most diffident of creatures. When Mallarmé spoke to him, he would bow, mumble, colour like a virgin. Then, lacking the mettle to respond, he would shrink into his frock coat like a tortoise into its carapace, recovering his composure only when attention had shifted elsewhere. I have always suspected that M. Rebell froze at Mallarmé's quite as thoroughly as I did.

Yet there were evenings when the discourse quickened. These occurred when the painter Whistler, visiting Paris, called upon the poet who had so exquisitely translated his delightful *Ten O'Clock* lecture. At once mischievous and lyrical, Whistler conversed abundantly and brilliantly. His remarks, sparkling with wit, thawed the salon's atmosphere. Under his influence, the most rigid gradually unbent. Gone were the muffled tones and cryptic utterances droned in undertones. We even ventured to laugh. And scarcely anyone save M. Albert Mockel persisted in accumulating minute crystals of frost upon his ideas—rather like those Arctic lichens they resembled in their bloodless, tangled pallor.

But such interludes were exceptional. Ordinarily, proceedings unfolded as I have described, within a kind of cold-storage chamber. As for Mallarmé's disquisitions, they invariably touched upon some metaphysical or literary nicety. Never a commanding vista; rather, a devotion to minutiae that bordered on the infinitesimal.

One day, for instance, when Zola came under discussion, M. Mauclair denied all merit to the author of the *Rougon-Macquart*, prompting Mallarmé to observe: "There are nonetheless certain passages of his that evoke. In *Nana*, the chapter where he presents the girl warming herself naked before a wood fire. There, he has succeeded in suggesting Nana's skin to us."

I awaited the sequel. But Mallarmé offered nothing further. I have preserved these words as emblematic, for they epitomise his cast of mind perfectly. And thus it was with everything. I never heard him produce anything but attenuated sophisms, vaporous paradoxes, and aperçus so rarefied as to be invisible.

If my impressions are compared with those set down by the writers whose ardent enthusiasm I have cited—and whose sincerity I have no grounds to impugn—it will perhaps be said that I lacked the capacity to appreciate the full significance of Mallarmé's pronouncements. Possibly so. Nevertheless, I remain convinced that my antagonists fell under a species of enchantment, and having mistaken guttering rush-lights in a cellar's gloom for the stars that grace the boundless firmament, they never succeeded in dispelling this peculiar delusion.

However that may be, I eventually wearied of the restraint I imposed upon myself in suppressing my increasingly hostile view of a writer and speaker whose every dictum struck my ear as an interminable dissonance.

I subjected my reactions to rigorous scrutiny; I re-read Mallarmé's complete œuvre and at length reached the conviction that I owed it to myself to break publicly and decisively with a rhetorician who vexed without edifying me.

The day my resolution crystallised, I exhaled a mighty breath of liberation. Since I was simultaneously embarking upon that existence amidst nature, amongst trees and remote from literary society, which has since become my own, I determined to crush without mercy those rhetorical blooms,

with their synthetic perfumes, that Mallarmé employed to stupefy my comrades-in-arms of Symbolism. I launched that crusade for clarity and vitality in art which earned me considerable vituperation but which, I maintain, restored certain of my detractors—the less thoroughly intoxicated—to their senses.

NOTE

I proclaimed my deliverance from the Mallarmean darkness in two stanzas of the epilogue that closes *L'Archipel en fleurs*. Allow me to quote these verses here. They capture my state of mind perfectly:

J'ai connu le portique aux disputes oiseuses:
Sous l'arcade branlante où meurent des clartés,
Les rhéteurs solennels en leur stérilité
Trônaient et discutaient la vie impérieuse;

Leur bras tremblait, chargé d'un sceptre dérisoire.
Ils murmuraient des mots menteurs comme leur gloire,
Ils modelaient leur âme en coupe de mensonge
Qu'ils offraient à la soif d'enfants ensorcelés
Ou, vantant le mystère inane de leurs songes.
Ils calomniaient l'ombre et le ciel étoilé
Mais l'erreur et l'ennui troublaient leurs yeux voilés.

Arrachant le bandeau qu'ils m'avaient imposé,
J'ai vu grandir au loin la lumière réelle,
J'ai renversé le temple et contre eux j'ai tiré
L'épée où l'aube claire éclate en étincelles

[I have known the portico of futile disputations:
Beneath the tottering archway where light lies dying,
The solemn rhetoricians in their sterility
Sat enthroned, debating imperious life;
Their arms trembled, bearing a derisory sceptre.
They murmured words as false as their glory,
They moulded their souls into cups of deceit
Which they offered to the thirst of spellbound children
Or, vaunting the empty mystery of their dreams,
They slandered the shadows and the starlit sky
But error and ennui clouded their veiled eyes.

Tearing off the blindfold they had imposed upon me,
I saw true light growing in the distance,

I overthrew the temple and against them drew
The sword where bright dawn bursts into sparks]

A Visit to Verlaine

I have no intention here of analysing Paul Verlaine's work. I've done so already in numerous articles and have, moreover, devoted to him a series of lectures which, I'm told, won the poet fresh admirers.

What follows is merely an attempt to capture two or three traits that reveal this soul—at once innocent as a child's, yet violent and refined. Above all, I want to recount a visit I paid him during one of his many stays at Broussais Hospital. That day, we had a conversation about Rimbaud whose substance deserves, I believe, to be recorded.

So then, without further ceremony, to the matter at hand.

One night, around one in the morning, Stuart Merrill, two English friends and I were crossing the Pont au Change. We'd left an evening gathering at *La Plume* and were making for a late-night restaurant on the Right Bank, there to sup whilst discussing art and literature until dawn. In those far-off days, this was rather our habit.

As we neared the far end of the bridge, I suddenly spotted a figure which, despite the fog rising from the river, struck me as familiar. Drawing closer, I recognised Verlaine.

He was leaning against the parapet, head bowed towards the waters, watching the Seine churn through the shadows in glints of gold and blood, listening to her sinister wails as she tore her skirts against the bridge piers and rushed beneath the echoing arches.

I hailed the Master and asked what brought him there so late and alone. In a voice thick with tears he answered: "I'm bored, oh! so desperately bored... I've been debating whether I shouldn't simply throw myself into the Seine."

We couldn't abandon him to this crisis of despair. We proposed he join us and do us the great honour of supping in our company.

Verlaine hesitated. He eyed my friends' evening dress as though their dinner jackets, white ties and silk hats quite unnerved him. Then, drawing me aside, he said precisely this: "Look here, Retté, you're a good sort, no nonsense about you, and I feel at ease with you. But your friend Merrill and these English gentlemen intimidate me: they're far too smart for the likes of me!"

I pressed him. I assured him that Merrill—whom he scarcely knew—was the most genial fellow in the world and, what's more, his devoted admirer. As for our friends from across the Channel, they hadn't an ounce of pomposity and would be absolutely delighted if Verlaine joined us.

The poet finally gave way. Yet he asked my friends to go ahead, as though fearful of slowing them down. Then he took my arm and, dragging his poor stiff leg, hobbling along, we followed at a distance.

As we walked, his melancholy lifted. He began to chaff me about my attire. "A tail-coat," he said, "a hat gleaming like a looking-glass, a white noose round your neck—it doesn't suit you at all. You're far better in felt and a jacket... for you too, deep down, are one of Paris's wild men." I gave as good as I got, and so, trading quips, we arrived at the restaurant where my friends, already settled in a private room, awaited us. There, Verlaine's awkwardness returned. Despite all the warmth and deference shown him, he remained mute, barely touched his food, and left his glass untouched.

At last, over dessert, determined to lift his spirits, I launched without warning into his *Colloque sentimental*. At the first line, he started, even half-raised his hand in protest. But as I continued, taking infinite care to do justice to those magnificent verses, he relaxed. Joy flickered across his great brow, his eyes glittered with sudden brightness, and when I finished, he cried: "Again! Again!" Like a child given sweets and clamouring for more.

So I recited the celebrated sonnet: *Langueur*.

Je suis l'Empire à la fin de la décadence...

[I am the Empire at the end of decadence...]

Verlaine was radiant. Then he asked for the final poem from *Sagesse*: "C'est la fête du blé, c'est la fête du pain..." [It's the feast of wheat, it's the feast of bread...]

I obliged, delighted to give him pleasure. The last line spoken, Verlaine turned to my friends and, spreading his hands in a roguish gesture, declared: "There we are!" Everything that "There we are!" contained—pride (well-founded), satisfaction that I'd captured his verses' subtleties to his taste, and above all the translation of this unspoken thought: "My fine gentlemen, you've stood me supper. Retté has settled my account; we're square."

He immediately made to leave. I offered to see him home and he accepted. Outside, he said: "I think your friend Merrill's a decent chap... But those two Englishmen don't suit me... They looked like eels dipped in boot-black."

As we walked, his good humour evaporated. Seeing him sliding back into his black mood, I tried to distract him with jokes—stuffed with puns and argot—about various absurdities of the contemporary literary scene. Usually, he relished such foolery. How often he'd said: "Come on, Retté, give me your Ballad of Academic Arses or your parody of Coppée's *Petit-Épicier*."

But that night he scarcely listened, answered only in monosyllables, and finally retreated into a silence I respected. We continued wordlessly to his door. I bade him goodnight. At the street corner, I glanced back instinctively and saw Verlaine still standing on his threshold, watching me leave with a smile so kind yet so forlorn that I retraced my steps. When I reached him again, he laid his hand on my shoulder: "I'm in your debt, my friend. When you found me, I was about to jump. I'd spent the evening brooding over things I prefer not to dwell on: my widowerhood, my fractured existence... I'd reached the point where even my poetry seemed poor compensation for so many dark memories. You reminded me I had talent, you lit me up and warmed me through... I'm still sad, but I shan't kill myself."

Those who've lived life to its depths know what bitter aftertaste its fruits can leave, how death can seem, at such moments, a Circe offering her enticing cup. They'll understand the joy and pride I felt in telling myself: "I prevented Verlaine from taking his own life."

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On another occasion, I found Verlaine positively buoyant. He'd returned from a lecture tour through Belgium and Holland. He'd gained weight, his leg was less rigid, and having brought back

enough money to secure his daily bread, he was forming plans—never to be realised—for a steady, productive life.

"I'm going to set up house properly!" he kept saying jubilantly, clicking his fingers like castanets.

Then he regaled me with tales of his travels. He mimicked, with boyish glee, the grave gentleness of the Dutch and mocked, though without malice, the *pretensions* of his Belgian audiences. "What truly astonished me," he added, "was Maurice Maeterlinck... A marvel, that Maeterlinck, a revelation! When I arrived in Ghent, knowing nobody there, I went straight to his door. Judging by his plays and poems, I expected to find some wan, consumptive wraith, wrapped in flannel and subsisting on tisanes. Not a bit of it! He's a hearty, robust fellow who welcomed me with the greatest bonhomie. He plied me with excellent dark beer, then announced in that Flemish accent you can imagine: 'Now then, dear Master, we're going to tuck into a proper steak, don't you know...'

"And tuck in we did—to that steak and plenty more besides. This Maeterlinck can put it away. So can I, come to that. Afterwards he talked about his bees whilst puffing on his pipe... These are my kind of mystics!"

Such was Verlaine's first impression of Maeterlinck. The latter will be pleased to learn, I think, that the Master retained the fondest memories of their meeting and even planned to return the favour "when he was properly set up" with equally substantial steaks.

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Arthur Rimbaud, as is well known, died in Marseille on 10 November 1891. Soon after, disputes arose concerning various circumstances of his life, his character, and his relationship with Verlaine.

I wrote at the time a brief piece for *L'Ermitage*, of which I quote this passage: "Of late—particularly since his death—Arthur Rimbaud has been much discussed. Polemics have erupted, not regarding the poet's literary merit but concerning certain incidents from his life. One M. D. in *Les Entretiens politiques et littéraires* and Mlle Isabelle Rimbaud in *La Bataille* are at each other's throats, agreeing only on this: during his schooldays at Charleville, Arthur Rimbaud carried off every prize save mathematics. A *swot*, in other words, as headmasters say.

"Don't you think the legendary aura surrounding Rimbaud's memory is entirely fitting and should be carefully preserved?

"Rather than labouring to clarify sundry obscure biographical details, let's deepen the mystery in which the sublime dreamer of the *Illuminations* chose to shroud himself. A poet isn't some 'passing gentleman'; he's a definitive, sometimes divine, voice. The version we should propagate is this: Arthur Rimbaud the adventurer never existed—Arthur Rimbaud is a myth."

Since then, M. Paterne Berrichon has published a book on Rimbaud recounting the poet's life with considerable accuracy and genuinely fraternal feeling. I read it with interest. Yet I'm still inclined to think, as I did in 1891, that we'd have done better to leave Rimbaud's memory wrapped in those storm clouds where we loved to place it. Now we know for certain that the incandescent poet of *Le Bateau ivre* became a punctilious merchant, and that his chief regret as death approached was dying without

having made his fortune in Abyssinia. For my part, I preferred to imagine Rimbaud as emperor of savage tribes, dying amidst cascades of gold dust and uncut gems in some war against tattooed, howling cannibals in deepest Africa. That would have been the most fitting finale to the wild poem of Rimbaud's youth.

When I published the article from which I've just quoted, I went to see Verlaine. He was undergoing treatment at Broussais Hospital, that sprawl of buildings evoking, in the depths of Montrouge, something like a Boer settlement.

In hospital, Verlaine assumed a patriarchal air. Draped in a long blue greatcoat, wearing a woollen cap as the Venetian Doges wore their crowns, he wielded his stick like a shepherd's crook over the plaintive flock of cripples and incurables.

Outside, the poet wasn't always the easiest companion. Though he had moments of childlike mirth when he'd comment with delighted laughter on people and things, too often one found him possessed by the black demon of drink. Then came the repetitions and ramblings that so pained his admirers.

But at Broussais, he was himself again. His conversation, rich with facts, adorned with aphorisms both mocking and profound, his subtle judgements on literature and art—all this enchanted visitors.

That day, he spoke of Rimbaud[3]. His words seemed so remarkable that I jotted them down immediately upon leaving. So it's his very words I'm recording here.

Verlaine, when I arrived, sat by the window in a small ward with only four beds. He held one of those administrative forms, printed with medical notations and dietary requirements, on which he habitually composed his verses. But he wasn't working. Lost in painful reverie, he let his gaze drift outside as though seeking relief from his sorrow. I approached and greeted him. He shook my hand; then, after a few words about his health, he lowered his head and lapsed back into silence. Fearing I was intruding, I was about to withdraw when he suddenly rose, took my arm and said: "Come, let's walk. It's suffocating in here."

We went into the garden. Though January reigned, the temperature was so mild it felt like autumn. A wan sun occasionally threaded a ray through the low grey clouds crowding the sky. The naked trees, the wilted chrysanthemums in the borders rustled faintly. We alone walked the paths. Verlaine, his leg giving him considerable pain, soon stopped. He indicated a bench: "Let's sit there," he said. "I'd hoped to walk off certain dark thoughts plaguing me, but I can't manage it."

Once seated, I asked if he'd received bad news and, if so, whether he'd confide his troubles. "You know," I added, "I'm entirely at your disposal, and if you need anything done on your behalf, I'll gladly see to it."

Verlaine shook his head: "No," he murmured, almost inaudibly, "I need nothing... What oppresses me now aren't material concerns—it's my dreams... Since Rimbaud died, I see him every night."

He fell silent again. And I silently recited two stanzas from that haunting poem in *Parallèlement*, *Laeti et Errabundi*:

On vous dit mort, vous. Que le Diable
Emporte avec qui la colporte
La nouvelle irrémédiable
Qui vient ainsi battre à ma porte!
Je n'en veux rien croire. Mort, vous,
Toi, dieu parmi les demi-dieux!*
Ceux qui le disent sont des fous.
Mort, mon grand péché radieux!…

[They tell me you're dead. May the Devil
Take whoever spreads
This irreversible news
That comes knocking at my door!
I refuse to believe it. Dead, you,
You, god among demigods!
Those who say so are mad.
Dead, my great radiant sin!…][31]

As though divining my thoughts, Verlaine resumed harshly, fixing me with his black diamond eyes: "I cannot accept this death. We hadn't seen each other for years, but Rimbaud, his art, his face, always burned bright in my mind's depths...

"Tell me about him," I said. "It will help."

Then Verlaine, without preamble: "I see us in Brussels, in that squalid hotel on rue Pachéco where we'd taken rooms. I was sitting on the bed's edge. He stood by the door, arms crossed, his whole bearing a challenge... God! The malice, the cruel fire in those fallen angel's eyes! I'd said everything to make him stay. But he wanted to go, and I knew nothing would change his mind.

"My poor mother, who'd rushed from Paris to try to bring me back to my wife and child, was there too. She saw I was beside myself and silently placed her hand on my shoulder to restrain me.

"We stayed like that perhaps five minutes, Rimbaud and I, devouring each other with our eyes. Finally, Rimbaud turned away. 'I'm going,' he said. And gaining the corridor, he flew down the stairs four at a time. I heard the steps groaning under his bounds. I was gasping, seeing red: it felt as though he was tearing away my brain and heart.

"When I couldn't hear him any more, a storm broke inside me. I told myself I had to catch him, even if by force, and lock him in the room. I leapt up and rushed to the door. My mother tried to block me. 'Paul,' she pleaded, 'you're mad, come to yourself, think of your family!' But fury swept me away. I shoved her aside, shouting God knows what abuse. As she tried to bar my path, I pushed her so violently she struck her forehead against the door frame... Yes, I know how savage it sounds. But I'd lost all reason; I'd have killed anything to get Rimbaud back.

"I hurtled down the stairs. In the street, I saw Rimbaud walking along the pavement towards Boulevard Botanique. He moved slowly, seemingly uncertain. I caught up: 'You must come back, or mark my words, this will end badly.'

"'Leave me be,' he answered without looking at me.

"Then I felt madness take hold. I thought: there's nothing for it but to kill him. I pulled out the revolver I always carried and fired twice. Rimbaud fell... People seized me... and that was that."

Verlaine had spoken in a choked voice. His chest heaved as though suppressing sobs. I sensed it was healing for him to give his memories free rein.

"Once in prison," I asked, "when you learned Rimbaud's wound was slight, were you relieved?"

"No," Verlaine shot back. "My rage at losing him was so complete I wanted him obliterated... Only later, in my cell at Mons, then after my release, did I think of him with any tenderness... Though even then, no: not tenderness. That boy possessed a demonic magnetism. The memory of our days wandering the roads, drunk on frenzied art, came back like a tide bearing atrociously exquisite perfumes...

"I've known happiness twice. First with my wife—the only woman I've truly loved—a happiness that might have made me a different man, had I mastered my appetites. Then I tasted joys painful in their intensity with Rimbaud... I've never recovered from losing both."

He paused, then continued: "You wrote recently that Rimbaud was a legend. From a literary standpoint, you were probably right. But for me, Rimbaud is a living reality, a sun blazing inside me that refuses to be extinguished... That's why I dream of him nightly."

He extended his hand and slowly recited the closing stanza of the poem I'd been thinking of:

Quoi, le miraculeux poème
Et la toute philosophie,
Et ma patrie et ma bohème, Morts?...
Allons donc! tu vis ma vie!

[What, the miraculous poem
And all philosophy,
My homeland and my bohemia, Dead?...
Nonsense! You live my life!]

What more was there to say? I left him, sensing it best, now he'd unburdened himself, to leave him alone with his thoughts.

Those who insist on dragging morality into matters where it has no business will perhaps find it strange that I don't launch into some virtuous diatribe condemning Verlaine's love for Rimbaud.

But I see things differently. In Verlaine's case, I maintain that his vices, with all their consequences, gave us verses as sublime as those inspired by his remorse. Missing his wife, he voiced his longing for a tranquil existence painted in gentle half-tones. Missing Rimbaud, he voiced his longing

for a burning existence beyond all laws. This duality explains his genius. He suffered for it; it killed him. Let us recite to ourselves the finest poems from *Sagesse* and *Parallèlement*. Let us drum into those peddlers of pharisaical morality this truth: the poet's sole duty is to share with us, in all sincerity, how life feels to him. If he then neglects to drape his passions in fig leaves, that's his business.

So let's not censure Verlaine. Leave that foolish task to the Nordaus of this world[32].

Wednesday Evenings at L'Ermitage

Among the reviews that championed the cause of Symbolism, *L'Ermitage* played a signal role. It deserves, therefore, some pages in this book to recall its distinguished record and the part certain of its contributors played in it.

In 1891, *L'Ermitage* was directed by Henri Mazel and written chiefly by young men, most of whom have long since forsaken literature.

Their review, rather anaemic, created little stir: one found in it abundant articles on pedagogy and jurisprudence, mediocre verse, and an eclecticism altogether too bland—at least in the eyes of those who held that a review of "the young" ought to be an instrument of battle.

In December of that year, Mazel, with whom I had some acquaintance, had a mutual friend enquire whether I would consent to assume, jointly with René Boylesve and himself, the direction of *L'Ermitage*. I accepted on condition that I should have the right to champion the ideas I defended and to bring in all the Symbolists. Mazel desired nothing more; but a parliamentary nicety remained. By the statutes of *L'Ermitage*, any modification to the review required approval by a majority of regular contributors. An assembly was convened. It endorsed Mazel's proposals: Boylesve and I were appointed general secretaries by near-unanimous vote. Only two or three dissented, among them my friend Henry Bérenger, then president of the General Students' Association, today director, with Charbonnel, of the socialist paper *L'Action*.

Bérenger, whilst declaring that he rather appreciated my verse and considered me an estimable contributor, lamented the intrusion of Symbolism into a review he would have preferred to maintain a university—nay, academic—spirit. In those days, he inclined towards that neo-Christianity with vaguely social leanings promoted by Messrs Desjardins and Melchior de Vogüé... He has since transformed considerably—and to his credit!

Thus, steeped in these cold, grey illusions, dismayed to see the Symbolists thrust into obscurity the phantom of literature that his deluded youth mistook for a bourgeois reincarnation of the Galilean, Bérenger had set his candidacy against mine. Defeated, as I have said, he attempted at least to secure the poetry chronicle, hoping to combat on my own terrain an evolution he deemed lamentable. But I declared that if the reviewing of verse were not equally entrusted to me, I should resign before even assuming office. Another vote—and again I was elected poetry chronicler. My triumph—and by extension, Symbolism's—somewhat soured Bérenger. He vented his spleen in a book entitled *L'Aristocratie intellectuelle*, where, amongst genuinely worthy observations, one found much injustice towards the innovators. I attacked it vehemently—too vehemently—with the result that we remained estranged for years. Our reconciliation required experience to temper our youthful fire and, above all, a common hatred of religious hypocrisy and social injustice to make us brothers-in-arms...

The inaugural issue of *L'Ermitage*'s new series appeared, sporting a blazing orange cover, on 31 January 1892. The Symbolists already commanded considerable space, with the names of Pierre Louÿs, Ivanhoé Rambosson, Henri Degron, a laudatory analysis of Maeterlinck's *Les Aveugles* (staged the previous fortnight at the Théâtre d'Art), and a pen portrait of Stuart Merrill by Mazel. Hugues Rebell contributed a prose piece entitled *L'Absente*, which scarcely hinted at the vivid artistry in which the author of *La Câlineuse* now excels.

But the issue's chief curiosity was an article by Charles Maurras: *Le Repentir de Pythéas*. At this juncture, Jean Moréas had just split Symbolism by founding the École Romane, which numbered three disciples: Maurice du Plessys, Raymond de la Tailhède and Ernest Raynaud; one journalistic ally: Maurice Barrès; and one apologist in the reviews: Maurras.

Thus Maurras was combating—in language of admirable quality, I grant, and with sophisms whose flowery subtlety we savoured—the North, the poets of the North, and all inspiration of septentrional origin. We had already duelled over this matter in *La Plume*. As I had just published and presented him with my slim volume *Thulé des Brumes*, Maurras warned me he would seize the occasion to attack once more those who, born in the North, were inaugurating a literature true to their origins.

"Splendid," I replied, "I see no impediment to your extolling the École Romane at my book's expense. Indeed, if it would gratify you, I offer you *L'Ermitage* to expound your views entirely at your leisure."

Maurras took me at my word; his article appeared on the front page. Since the author of *Anthinéa* has not collected it in any of his volumes, I believe it worth quoting and summarising certain passages here.

First, the opening, which frames the question precisely: "Of the École Romane's numerous adversaries, you were virtually alone, my dear Retté, in displaying courtesy. Your discourse was vehement, yet I found no insult in it. I detected not the faintest trace of that base envy which all summer long swelled even Parnassus's meanest tributaries. You compared the *Nibelungen* to the *Iliad*. You dared set Brunhild against Helen, Siegfried against valiant Achilles. You cast singular disdain upon our félibres, yet you contrived to utter these blasphemies in the prose of a gentleman.

"Respond to you? I was tempted. But events were answering of their own accord.

"Mere days ago, an English poet crossed the Channel. When the *Echo de Paris* questioned him about the epochs of French literature, did he not declare that the most brilliant, to his taste, was the age of the courts of love?

"And he added that Swinburne, Morris, Rossetti and he himself owed their learning and their art to the examples set by the great Gascon and Provençal troubadours."

Appended to this passage, Maurras had added a note contesting my earlier assertion that Shakespeare was, despite borrowings from Greek, Roman and Renaissance Italian literature, an essentially English spirit. His rejoinder: "I obstinately hold great Will to be an Italian. Not that I attach the slightest significance to whatever he may have borrowed from Boccaccio and Bandello. It is Shakespeare's very soul that appears to me gorged with Renaissance sap. Better still, it is in him that Florence and Venice burst their finest bloom. He revelled in nature. He ignored law as the fauns ignored it. He knew and loved life in the pagan manner. No fear of the flesh, no trace of Anglicanism in this contemporary of Elizabeth."

I might have countered that Elizabethan England was wholly pagan, that Puritanism was barely stirring, that Shakespeare's fellow dramatists breathed the same air as he, and that here was evidence of an anti-Christian spirit pervading all lettered Europe at the time. That this spirit flourished under the influence of the Italian Muse, heiress to antiquity's great pagans, and that Shakespeare was felicitously inspired by it, none would dispute. Nevertheless, however universal his genius, I maintain with Taine

that it was English sap that gave him his vigour and caused him to flower in the dark blooms of *Macbeth*, *King Lear* and *Hamlet*.

How piquant, too, to discover in Maurras, that champion of order and hierarchy, such admiration for Shakespeare's exuberant individualism.

Maurras proceeded: "All our young friends will draw the moral from Oscar Wilde's discourses. Should they wish to admire Pre-Raphaelite art, they will visit Umbrian churches rather than Morris's house. They will study Hellenism elsewhere than in the *Second Faust*, and precisely in those works where the North's greatest genius went begging to glean fine rhythms and fine thoughts. Indeed, if one discounts what he drew from Roman art, I scarcely know what remains of the Barbarians' art. Or rather, I do know, having already indicated it: the septentrional poets retain what might equally be found anywhere: rich blood, sensitive nerves, and talent. But these cannot be transmitted. They are the matter of artworks, not their form; they are entirely personal secrets; one cannot assimilate such qualities; they cannot be taught."

The article then dissected my slim volume with considerable finesse and acuity. Maurras rendered this verdict, to which I am now almost inclined to subscribe: "*Thulé des Brumes* transports us to the realm of the inconceivable. I am certain it marks the uttermost boundary of habitable literature."

Indeed, when I chance to leaf through *Thulé*, I am struck by the extremity of reverie I ventured in that volume. It is a maelstrom of chimeras that nearly appals me. To steady myself, I must compare it with books where I have since endeavoured to express my love of ordered sensations and nature. But in 1891, neither Symbolism nor I had discovered our path. We sought the new "though none remained in the world." Hence the curious success this breviary of dreams achieved...

As it stood, Maurras's article merited recalling. It set forth the Roman thesis unequivocally: nothing is admirable beyond the Greek and Latin tradition. It sparked considerable controversy: a judicious refutation by Mazel in *L'Ermitage*, rather caustic pieces by Bernard Lazare and Vielé-Griffin in the *Entretiens politiques et littéraires*.

Many further polemics followed, provoked by Symbolism's dissidents. And Jean Moréas and his disciples established their right to archaism only with considerable difficulty:

Tantae molis erat romanam condere... scholam!

[Such mighty labour was it to establish a Roman... school!]

I may yet return to these quarrels.

Meanwhile, *L'Ermitage* flourished and gained authority. As I have noted, through it, as through the *Entretiens*, the *Mercure de France* and *La Plume*, we could finally expound our ideas and print our verses in sustainable publications. And despite the press's mockery, we attracted a considerable following.

At *L'Ermitage*, we maintained perfect harmony. The three persons of the Trinity—Mazel-Retté-Tardivaux—never bickered over the composition of issues. We invariably agreed on managing the review and on the merit of publishing Symbolists alongside Romanists and guardians of the Parnassian tradition. Only the Realists held aloof, for our idealism, our devotion to an art of décor and legend,

held no appeal for them. As for our contributors, those who sparred as theoreticians remained the best of friends in private.

Mazel resolved to strengthen these bonds by hosting soirées where our friends might gather and discourse *de omni re scibili... et quibusdam aliis*[33] under the genial presidency of the master of the house and a charming Lady with golden tresses and sparkling azure eyes who graciously poured us impeccable tea and sublime sherry-brandy with her own hands.

These receptions occurred at Mazel's flat in the rue de Varenne. One encountered poets, painters, philosophers and several musicians. Alphonse Germain, champion of Catholic art, conversed in a corner with Alexandre Séon, a somewhat pallid painter but remarkable draughtsman who later exhibited with the Rosicrucians and illustrated M. Péladan's works. Germain, ever composed, proved most engaging to hear. He would have been equally engaging to read had he not peppered his articles with alarming neologisms such as "ipséisme," which he proposed as substitute for "personality." The composer Quittard, who set several poems from *Le Pèlerin passionné* to music, sparred over Wagner with his colleague Gaston Dubreuilh, who delighted in opposing to the Master of Bayreuth the trifling melodies of Boieldieu, Auber and sundry Ambroise Thomases. Le Cardonnel, submerged in an armchair, advanced in cavernous tones arguments for mounting a crusade to restore the Papal States. Henry Bérenger demanded we quest for a modern ideal or bitterly denounced M. Barrès's philosophy. Henri Degron, exceedingly shy, attired in canary-yellow nankeen with sky-blue cravat, pressed himself against the mantelpiece, uttered not a syllable, and swept the assembly with the dreamy gaze of his oriental eyes. Stuart Merrill, handsome as a demigod, perpetually just disembarked from a transatlantic steamer or poised to catch a train for obscure German territories, regaled us with travel tales. Rambosson, jovial and crafty, ribbed Signoret, knight of the Holy Grail, who responded by declaiming his latest verses with wild abandon. One fanatic for nebulous metaphysics, Doctor Antoine Cros, brother to the poet Charles Cros and the glass artist Henri Cros, crushed us with ponderous disquisitions on Kant, Hegel and Schelling. To create a diversion, I would steer him towards Villiers de l'Isle-Adam. He loathed—I never discovered why—the admirable author of *Contes cruels* and *L'Ève future*, and launched inexhaustible diatribes against him. When he had thoroughly vented his bile, amid universal censure, I branded him a "sinister greybeard" and hounded him with mockery until he shut his calumny valve. Then he would pluck a book from the shelves, feign absorption in reading, and whilst darting furious glances my way, remain mute for the evening's remainder.

Henri de Régnier occasionally appeared and, his monocle glinting over the poets' circle, proclaimed with disquieting qualifications the virtues of free verse. Laurent Tailhade either fashioned madrigals for our hostess or recited his exquisite ballads—*Lorsque Jésus reconnaîtra les siens* or *Fleurissons-nous d'un brin de clématite*—when not execrating Jean Rameau, that limping rhapsodist, and the dominion of the Philistine. Vielé-Griffin, bristling and churlish as ever, bombarded his interlocutors with snubs. Hugues Rebell, a startled, clean-shaven creature, sought sanctuary in Boylesve's shadow, who, stroking his silken beard, whispered outrageous obscenities in his ear for the pleasure of watching him flush scarlet.

Throughout it all, Mazel, buoyant and nimble, circulated through the salon, introducing kindred spirits, discussing by turns strategy, aesthetics and religion, and with consummate grace setting everyone at ease...

In short, the atmosphere could not have been more convivial. Thus those who attended these soirées have never ceased cherishing their memory with nostalgia for that time when we were young, brimming with splendid illusions, and so devoted to pure art that all else seemed trivial by comparison.

Naturally, amongst so many remarks exchanged in enthusiasm, there was scope for certain mild absurdities. It was to chronicle these that Harold Swan came into being.

As is known, under this pseudonym I diverted myself for three years by satirising certain foibles of Symbolism—not sparing myself. The secret, known only to Mazel, Boylesve, Léon Deschamps, Rambosson and my son Henri Degron, was so thoroughly preserved that I received letters from certain adversaries congratulating me for lampooning the school and especially "that preposterous Retté."[5]

Finally, to carry the jest to its conclusion, Deschamps commissioned a purported portrait of Harold Swan, and Rambosson, arch-mystifier, published in *La Plume* a fictitious biography so delightfully absurd that I reproduce it below.

HAROLD SWAN

He was an extraordinary man, and I met him in an extraordinary way. Some people simply cannot be met otherwise.

I had taken refuge for a month during the winter of 1891 on a Norman beach—*an utter backwater*. One snowy day, whilst strolling along the shore, I spotted a young man striding towards me from the opposite direction, dressed with far greater elegance than the place warranted. As our paths crossed, he halted abruptly, rigid as a soldier at attention, and shot at me point-blank, with a bow of flawless propriety: "You must be a poet, sir, to find pleasure in such a place at such a season and such an hour?"

"Perhaps," I replied.

"Oh!" he cried out. Then pronounced: "Good day to you, sir." And bowing still more correctly, he continued on his way, leaving me thoroughly bemused.

Only in Paris did I encounter him again and come to know him properly.

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Harold Swan was born at Swan Castle in Hampshire on Christmas Day 1866. His father, formerly Member of Parliament for the borough of Brandywine, was a *gentleman farmer*, whilst his mother—who cherished a profound admiration for Keats and Shelley—was a French governess he had married rather late in life.

Young Harold received his early education in Scotland from a Dominican monk. He later attended Eton and Cambridge, where he proved an abysmal student, frittering away his days at lawn tennis or rowing. By night, he devoured Shakespeare and Poe.

Coming down to London, he squandered prodigious amounts of time in every *grill-room* and *gin palace*; there he fell in with various artists and became a particular habitué of Mr Oscar Wilde, whose conversation inspired him to try his hand at literature. Yet his restless spirit still afforded his reflections no repose. At twenty, he decamped for Belgium, returning with this sole impression, preciously recorded in his notes: "It is an exceedingly flat country."

He badgered his father for some time to purchase him an ensign's commission in the Indian Army, then suddenly renounced all martial ambitions and took to covering reams of paper with ink. For several years he inhabited Swan Castle; in absolute seclusion, he laboured with passion. At last, seized by a yearning to discover France, he departed for Paris in November 1891, where—save for two excursions to Normandy and the Ardennes—he has remained ever since.

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Young and enigmatic of countenance, with high forehead and eyes faintly contemptuous behind his pince-nez, from six or seven in the evening—the hour he rises for his apéritif—one may observe him traversing the Boulevard Saint-Michel, austere of bearing, invariably clad in black over immaculate linen, seeming to survey humanity from the summit of his ennui.

At his habitual restaurant near the Odéon, when dining alone, he enquires of the waiter about the day's happenings, being possessed of a horror of newspapers. Should he encounter M. Moréas there, to that gentleman's infinite despair, he regales him with gothic and romantic tales or holds forth on the Eleusinian mysteries; before M. Merrill, who professes to loathe Shakespeare, he expatiates endlessly upon Hamlet; and when M. Retté appears, to signal his displeasure, he poses impossible riddles.

Glacially reserved, seldom laughing, smiling still less, he punctuates lengthy silences with terse observations delivered with perfect sangfroid.

Of women he remarks: "They are delightful little creatures," and removes his pince-nez to regard them, "so as not to perceive their sculptural imperfections," consorting with them carnally only "when that hoary monster Nature roars too insistently from the pit of one's baser instincts."

When religion arises, he elucidates: "The Almighty is a thoroughly decent old gentleman"; on sociology, he maintains: "Everyone possesses, in principle, an income of a hundred thousand francs."

His aesthetic views: "Music is opium of an inferior grade; painting, I prefer to dream; literature, a remedy for spleen." His philosophy: "One must play Life false whilst ensuring she cannot return the compliment."

His motto: "*I like all; specially myself*."

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After dinner he vanishes mysteriously. Despite the minimal regard M. Retté and he have for one another, they frequently venture out together: as though destiny compels them to perpetrate appalling puns in tandem and collaborate on preposterous works—invariably destroyed forthwith.

The Latin Quarter witnesses his return towards two in the morning from these dubious expeditions, his silk hat tilted rakishly over the left eye, redolent of English spirits, declaiming such doggerel as:

Le Kanguroo que l'on exile d'Australie,
S'il épouse une outarde, hélas! se mésallie.

[The Kangaroo, from Australia banned,
If he weds a bustard, debases his hand.]

Thence he proceeds to finish the night at Les Halles, haunting the establishment of *Père Tranquille* alongside Robert Sherard, Corbier, and sundry poets.

When eight o'clock strikes, he retires to his hotel room, which contains neither book nor writing materials (he works in cafés). This nondescript chamber lacks even a picture or print: he uses it solely for sleep.

Harold Swan has published in English a volume of verse and prose poems entitled *Falling Stars*, which he dismisses as "a singularly wearisome trifle." Here and there, scattered through various reviews but principally in *L'Ermitage*, he has disseminated his *Propos épars*—humorous pieces that instantly commanded attention—and *Nocturnes selon Paris*, wherein he betrays considerable influence from Adolphe Retté's *Thulé des Brumes*. In these *Nocturnes*, he captures with peculiar charm the sensations of his thousand and one perambulatory nights.

Harold Swan is, above all else, an enigma of a man possessed of an enigmatic soul. In an epoch when everyone is cut from identical cloth, like the ready-to-wear from Belle-Jardinière, this alone commands attention.

YVANHOÉ RAMBOSSON

As for the *Propos épars*, of which I shall present two specimens, their wit was relished—without malice. Whilst certain ill-wishers claimed to detect unvarnished "snapshots" therein, those better acquainted with us readily perceived that, though indeed portraits, Harold Swan had deliberately exaggerated them to the point of caricature.

Such as they were, they delighted many and intrigued still more.

Let the reader judge whether their success was warranted.

SCATTERED REMARKS

I

Speech was bestowed upon the man of letters
that he might sing the praises of his own thought.

Some Wednesdays past, on an evening consecrated to metaphysics and sherry-brandy at *L'Ermitage*, languidly entombed in one of those armchairs whose monopoly your solicitude reserves for friends alone, I listened—all the while affecting to sink into a somnolence I shall not scruple to call *abstruse*, nay, *Eleusinian*—I listened to the conversations humming round my silence.

I observed—on that evening of spleen—your acquired habit of voicing nothing save transcendent ideas; yet I observed too that this practice led you into sundry moral enormities, into certain presumptions (if the term be not too severe) whose very impertinence seemed wholly to escape your notice.

Now then, since you have been gracious enough to grant me several pages of your splendid review that I might write therein "whatever I please", it has seemed only fitting to set down, quite simply, those utterances through which your genius revealed itself most characteristically—together with commentary of a somewhat astringent nature.

Thus, said I to myself, amongst these fair blooms opening to the sunshine of the Self, I shall play the old mole who burrows beneath, severs roots, and heaves up through the sward those clods of rustic earth whose homely dullness so agreeably disrupts the monotony of countless gaudy blossoms drunk on their own egotistical perfumes.

Yet events unfolded otherwise than I had foreseen…

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Opposite me, religion was under discussion. Excellent things were being said amongst the middling. But I found myself particularly captivated by the sphinxine expression in Monsieur Alphonse Germain's gaze. Indeed, M. Germain struck me as constituting, in his own person, an entire religion.

Of a sudden, M. Mazel cried out in reply to someone: "That's one of the foundational concepts in *La Fin des Dieux*." I lifted my lids a fraction and surveyed his interlocutors. Not a soul appeared moved by this pronouncement.

The conversation veered towards philosophy, and I was following it but distractedly when M. Mazel cried out anew: "That's one of the foundational concepts in *La Fin des Dieux*." Nobody so much as raised an eyebrow.

Capital, thought I; it stands demonstrated for M. Mazel that *La Fin des Dieux* is a work of profound religious and philosophical significance. Nevertheless...

But I deferred my reflections, for beside me M. Adolphe Retté was agitating questions of sentiment with M. Henri Bérenger.

Apropos M. Retté, I must declare that the notion—rather prevalent in literary circles—that this poet numbers amongst my most intimate friends is to me singularly disagreeable. I read his verses now and again, and willingly enough, provided there be not too many; but his conversation I cannot abide. He possesses a taste for mystery, a tortuous and mystifying cast of mind, a mania for elaborate phrases —ornate as his poetry—studded with barbs and wordplay that I find exceedingly irksome. Hence I am compelled to deplore that my quasi-illustrious compatriot, M. Stuart Merrill, should have termed this conversation "hallucinatory"; for my part, I find it frequently—soporific.

So then, Messieurs Bérenger and Retté, having split sundry hairs into infinitesimal fragments, arrived at this conclusion: that in matters of love, men display more pride than vanity, whilst women display more vanity than pride. Though this discovery contained nothing remarkable, they maintained silence for a considerable interval, rubbing their hands and gazing into one another's eyes with expressions of triumphant satisfaction.

After some minutes, M. Retté declared: "I have composed a line in which the matter is admirably crystallised."

"Yes, yes, I know..." responded M. Bérenger, who doubtless feared the recitation of the entire poem.

By Jove, thought I, M. Retté possesses the gift of synthesis—yet still...

To the other side of my chair, discourse concerned a plate containing butter that certain persons were monopolising to the detriment of certain others. There was also mention of a frying-pan handle over which contemptible individuals were squabbling. At length someone observed that So-and-so had pulled Someone Else's chestnuts from the fire. Then came the exclamation: "Ah! If only I could get my fingers in the pie!"

"I say," I enquired of my neighbour, "are these gentlemen naturally discussing culinary matters?"

"Not in the least," he replied. "These gentlemen are discussing politics."

"Yet surely—that plate?"

He regarded me coolly and answered with perfect composure: "The fiscal plate."

Now I comprehend, thought I, why the majority of Frenchmen term politics a filthy kitchen, for...

A dogmatic voice—the voice of a Dominican in his pulpit on a day of Lenten fast—interrupted my meditations. Hard by, M. Le Cardonnel was upbraiding M. Signoret for his carnal proclivities and lamenting that this Knight of the Holy Grail should imperil his salvation through nocturnal peregrinations in the wake of Messieurs Corbier, Retté, and sundry other accursed *night-birds* of established ill fame.

He concluded: "Follow my example; remain pure—for mark you well, the Blessed Virgin is the sole woman one may decently frequent."

Though no papist, I felt affronted by such familiarity; and moreover...

M. Valin, who squanders his ocular health peering into people's palms, was scrutinising the hand and digits of a young Annamite[7] — a prolific author of romances which are, I grant, quite charming.

M. Valin was pronouncing: "The thumb is short—scant willpower; the Mount of Apollo, strongly marked—the index finger equal in length to the ring finger—the nails unclean..."

"Unclean nails?" enquired the Annamite. "What do they signify?"

"Elevated intellectual preoccupations. Observe my own nails—they're considerably filthier than yours."

"Capital!" I exclaimed. "That hardly astonishes me."

"What doesn't?" said the Annamite, looking rather pinched.

"Why, the felicitous aptness of M. Valin's confirmatory illustration."

I had resolved to reserve M. Tardivaux's pronouncements for the finale; but they proved that evening of so particularly indelicate a nature that I hesitate to chronicle them here. Yet upon reflection, I shall attempt it...

M. Tardivaux expatiated upon the activities of little girls aged four to six (he was quite specific) who play in the Luxembourg Gardens in the afternoons. He spoke of their little bare necks—like camellia petals—their little bare legs—the faintest coral pink—their floating wisps of hair—Atalanta before the golden apples[34]—with an enthusiasm that might perhaps have been pardoned in those elderly gentlemen who play at spillikins in the adjacent palace, but which seemed extraordinary in this emir crossed with Saint-Mégrin that is M. Tardivaux[35].

At last he concluded: "I shall create something from this."

"Victor Hugo has already done so," his interlocutor objected.

"One can do better," M. Tardivaux affirmed.

I might recount numerous other such pronouncements, but the exercise would prove wearisome and would doubtless plunge my readers into the most lamentable stupor. Should I not be destroying their cherished illusions regarding literature?

I shall merely add that M. Mazel repeatedly alluded, with marked persistence, to a certain Saint Anthony whose opinions he appeared to hold in the highest regard. That M. Retté, bent upon assailing M. Huysmans's artistic persona, repeated to various persons, with absurd insistence, that he had formerly defined this author as "the Juvenal of dyspepsia."

A thoroughly misguided epithet, thought I. For my part, I hold M. Huysmans to be nothing more than a common snob. I shall add, finally, that each personality present strutted and swelled, as befits men of letters, in the most insufferably tedious fashion imaginable.

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"These gentlemen are most remarkable," I observed, turning to M. Germain, who had not yet pronounced a single syllable.

"Alas," he replied, "these gentlemen are losing their souls—and Péladan as well."

I so admired his compassion that I forbore to enquire what M. Péladan had to do with the matter... Though I confess some *blue devil* prompted me to read in M. Germain's eyes: "As for me, I am not losing my soul."

My bile was roused; I felt the black wings of my ancestral spleen fanning my brow, and I loathed my fellow creatures.

Vainly I endeavoured to solve problems of mechanics concerning beams and motes; vainly I sought to abstract myself in worshipful contemplation of the divine golden tresses of that exquisite and untamed Lady who presided over this tournament of Babel—all to no avail.

I concluded that departure was the wisest course.

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"I vow," I cried once in the street, "that with the first person I encounter, I shall converse... I shall not speak of Myself. And I shall navigate the conversation's twists with such dexterity that they too shall be prevented from speaking of themselves!"

The first person I encountered was M. Moréas.

"My dear fellow," said he, seizing my left arm in an iron grip, "I must recite to you a *Sylva* I have just now composed: it is sublime."

Desperately I pleaded the lateness of the hour, the addled state of my brain, a thousand pretexts for escape. M. Moréas held my left arm as in a vice: I was obliged to endure the *Sylva*...

"Is that not magnificent!" cried M. Moréas upon finishing. And with a splendid gesture—celebrated from the *Café d'Harcourt* to the *Soleil d'Or* and points beyond—he smoothed his Palikare[36] moustache, that blue-black moustache whose raven-wing lustre certain persons suspect—not without malice—of artificial enhancement.

I proffered hasty felicitations and fled—wishing upon M. Moréas the very misfortune that befell M. Charles Morice one night whilst declaiming his verses to the aforementioned M. Moréas.

But that *commedia dell'arte* I shall relate another time.

The hour grew late—or early, as you prefer—perhaps three o'clock, for: *Morning, like a child of light*... No, not that.

I repaired to consume some sandwiches and imbibe I know not what manner of *black strap* in a modest den of the rue Monsieur-le-Prince well known to Messieurs Tardivaux and Retté.

There I discovered a chansonnier, one M. Dalibard, who initially proved perfectly innocuous.

To forestall his speaking of *Himself*, I engaged him on the subject of those songs whereby M. Ferny criminally saps the foundations of established order.

"As for me," said M. Dalibard, "I'm small beer compared to Ferny; nonetheless..."

"Speaking of which," I roared to cut him short, "have you observed how the younger literature is embracing anarchism?"

"Indeed—the mildest fellows are suddenly proclaiming themselves ardent disciples of M. Ravachol[37]. I've composed a song about it, and..."

"Right then, right then! You shall sing it tomorrow... I'm frightfully weary."

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Once home, I roused—with rather more violence than strictly necessary—the *boy* who serves as my factotum and before whom I never appear *en déshabillé*.

"Dick," said I, "pack the trunks: we depart tomorrow."

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And depart I did. Exhausted by all those genius Egos the Hermits brandished remorselessly before my dazzled eyes, glutted and saturated with *ego-literature*, I have sought sanctuary in the Ardennes Forest. From thence, should you permit, I shall dispatch some exceedingly humble travel notes. I shall endeavour to be neither Touchstone nor Jaques the Melancholy; I shall not contemplate my navel; I shall not go Stendhal-ing about like M. Bourget. And to ensure I speak not of Myself, I shall employ only the impersonal pronoun.

Harold Swan.

II

Travel Unsettles the Young

In perusing the travel accounts of my esteemed contemporaries, I've observed that all—or very nearly all—invariably break into canticles of joy when describing their departure from Paris, celebrating the imminent delights of that rural sojourn they so covet.

I regret that I cannot add my voice to this lyrical chorus. Truth compels me to record that, far from feeling the appropriate spring in my step and sparkle in my eye, I was leaden, extinguished, nebulous as a November on the Thames, and that even beyond the fortifications, I kept my gaze desperately fixed upon Montmartre, ablaze in the night.

I have no love for the countryside. Indeed, I should never have quit Paris had the epidemic of *egotism* ravaging the literary set not obliged me to withdraw prudently, for fear of infection. — Though perhaps, after all, there's something salutary in putting one's soul and one's ass out to pasture now and again, letting them browse on hope—as M. Saint-Pol-Roux would have it—for a few weeks. The tedium of a bucolic fortnight earns one the compensation of returning with a soul made new, all fresh and ingenuous: tinted with Marion Delorme's reconstituted virginity, which one shall have licence to abuse until it rivals in decrepitude those old moons and yesteryear's snows that so preoccupied Master François Villon. Whereupon one is at liberty to sell one's shadow to the devil, after the fashion of Peter Schlemihl, and with the proceeds he furnishes, acquire a second-hand soul... They're hardly in short supply, though would you offer even a *farthing* for one?

Besides, to go several days without glimpsing M. Moréas's Romanesque moustache; to be spared M. Retté's execrable puns; to escape Saint Antoine's tactical and strategic disquisitions and M. Corbière's sneering dogmatic observations; and finally, to flee M. Tardivaux's senile depravities—surely this merits a little ennui.

Therefore: roll on, carriage! Spit and whistle, locomotive! (My soul incarnates itself in thee.) I am en route!...

Once the train had covered sufficient distance to put Montmartre beyond sight, I immersed myself, by the lamp's wavering light, in a work of M. de Goncourt. It was a volume of that writer's *Journal*—the latest, I believe.

M. de Goncourt's *Journal* admirably suits railway reading. For truly, amidst the carriage lurching over rails and turntables at station junctions, the prattle of one's travelling companions, how could one abstract oneself sufficiently to savour a sustained work that unfolds its action according to the consecrated unities? Whereas M. de Goncourt's *Journal*, with its clipped phrases, clipped reflections, clipped judgements, its clipped aesthetic, provides ample amusement without excessive absorption. Rather like nibbling at a tart made from unripe gooseberries, taken in small slices. I read on until I stumbled (ten minutes before Reims) upon a paragraph asserting that "men possessed of substantial posteriors generally exhibit a feminine character." I quote from memory, but that's the *precise* sense of it. This discovery cast me into profound and wondering stupefaction. Good Lord! thought I, I've known any number of men blessed with substantial posteriors, not least my honoured father, M. Richard E.

Swande Munt-Salvats Swan-Manor in Hampshire, yet I never observed the slightest hint of femininity in their character or comportment. Nothing, indeed, could have been less feminine than the moral constitution of M. Swan senior. Throughout his long life, the old *gentleman* displayed in every circumstance an energy and directness of the most thoroughly masculine variety—qualities that shone with particular brilliance in his relations with his tenants. Moreover, when these worthies emerged from the parlour where my father collected his rents, and whence issued, on such days, a veritable chorus of interjections and "Your Honour, God damn me, the account stands true!", they would withdraw muttering phrases that, far from extolling M. Swan's feminine tenderness, devolved into dark allusions to creatures of the plantigrade and amphibian persuasion. This curious devotion amongst the tenantry to such imperfect metempsychosis puzzled me exceedingly as a child. As for M. de Goncourt... Well then! M. de Goncourt's physiological apophthegm grants him every right, in every sense, to the sobriquet: Lavater à rebours[38].

The train halted, and I forgot M. de Goncourt entirely to admire a magnificent horse chestnut, perfectly spherical, that rose beside the station. Most aesthetic, this chestnut. Its restive foliage, etched like black lace against June's clear sky, filtered the full moon's rays with discernment. And there upon the ground, circling its trunk, fell what seemed a tremulous rain of medallions bearing old Hecate's likeness—that Uranian Cotytaris, as M. du Plessys would have it[39].

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Expect no scrupulous chronicle from me of every trifling incident of my journey. I abhor such minutiae and cannot fathom those who cannot travel three miles without rhapsodising over each "small occurrence" of their peregrination—those microscopic incidents that in their writings strike me not, as M. Retté would say, like Voltaire perched on Bloy's leg, but like mouldy currants spotting the indigestible *pudding* of their impressions. May they find themselves keeping *turnpikes* on some godforsaken Welsh road!

All told, I should liken these punctilious scribblers to denizens of Brobdingnag who, through excessive study of Lilliput under magnification, develop such a mania that they come to measure everything in Brobdingnag by Lilliputian standards.

Myself, I favour general ideas.

The contemplation of moonlight through chestnut foliage encompasses a considerable number of general ideas.

I was preparing to deduce several when my neighbour accosted me. "Sir," said he, "we're behind schedule... And here's this train lingering beyond the two minutes specified in the timetable!"

I answered with an indeterminate grunt, for I dislike conversing with persons to whom I've not been introduced—pure national prejudice. My disinclination to engage did not deter my vis-à-vis. Though I granted him not one jot of attention, he continued expatriating upon subjects of supreme blandness until the train resumed motion. Then he ventured: "You're in commerce, I presume, sir?"

I met his gaze squarely and replied: "I traffic in general ideas."

This appeared to disconcert him somewhat; nevertheless, after a considerable pause, with a smile of monstrous cunning, he produced this impertinence: "I perceive that sir *concerns* himself with literature."

"I don't concern myself with it," I corrected him. "I am *pre-concerned* with it."

"They say," he persisted, "it's not a particularly profitable line. I have a cousin in Sainte-Ménehould who writes dramas. He even had one staged at our municipal theatre. Since his collateral connections are extensive throughout the district, the family occupied the orchestra stalls, the pit, the balcony, and the dress circle... Three hundred seats, sir, in the Sainte-Ménehould theatre!"

"Indeed!" said I. "And the public?"

"Oh! They were *up in the gods*. Naturally, sir, this 'attempt at artistic decentralisation' proved one sustained ovation. We were unstinting with our applause and curtain calls!"

"The claque always reeks of kinship," I observed. My neighbour eyed me with suspicion, but my unimpeachable gravity having allayed his doubts, he continued: "Yes! A veritable triumph... Though it did cost my cousin twelve hundred francs, paid to the director for mounting his drama, which played but once. Hence my conviction that literature makes a poor living."

"Impossible, indeed," I concurred, "to buttress your thesis with more compelling evidence... Yet, sir—if I may enquire—what are your literary convictions?"

"Sir, I draw up instruments and..."

"Good heavens!" I exclaimed, recoiling sharply. "Can you be a disciple of M. Ghil?"

"I'm unacquainted with that actor. I meant merely that my profession being that of notary, I lack the leisure to cultivate, however my inclinations might lead me, that particular branch of our intellectual faculties termed literature."

"Ah yes, you tip your hat to the old branch and hurry past."

This locution, admittedly somewhat colloquial, appeared to give offence. Nevertheless, after a silence more protracted than the first, he attempted to steer me towards politics. I severed his disquisitions by declaring that, in my view, all contemporary political questions could be distilled to this: *O Russia—quando te aspiciam!*[40]

At this rejoinder, he retreated into his corner, drew his cap over his eyes, and uttered not another syllable. At the next station, he decamped to another compartment.

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Again I say, you shall have no meticulous inventory of my journey's trivial incidents. Here are the sole observations meriting your attention:

1° Railway employees are, as a breed, remarkably ill-bred. I haven't investigated whether their disagreeable temperament corresponds, per M. de Goncourt's methodology, with any physical peculiarity. Here lies a question of biological import I commend to your meditation.

2° The landscape between Carignan and the Luxembourg frontier surpasses all description—though it bristle with "rare epithets," that hallmark of literary excellence, according to M. de Goncourt.

3° At the buffet of Longwy station, one finds dessert plates whose centres bear grimy engravings of figures in Persian costume, captioned thus:

The Francs-archers

4° A notice in white upon blue enamel informed me that the French customs post stands 374 kilometres from Paris—reassuring intelligence regarding the spread of *egotism*.

5° Finally, whilst we idled at said customs post, I heard a soldier bellowing a ballad concerning a bird "whom summer brings again." Though I failed to catch what followed, I surmised the inevitable rhyme must be "Theramenes' refrain"-—a conjecture I submit for the consideration of M. Dubus, that paladin of the rhyme riche[41].

There, I fancy, are human documents aplenty to construct an œuvre; each observation contains multitudes and could spawn any number of naturalist novels. Should any of your contributors wish to make use of them, I'll surrender my rights for a pittance.

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In this enchanting duchy of Luxembourg where I've sought sanctuary, my days decompose roughly thus: yawn, smoke, scratch my head whilst gazing upon a tribe of poppies haemorrhaging like lunatics beneath my window, attend to the wind's colloquy with that solemn senate of firs flanking my inn to east and south, coin exquisite phrases to capture M. Huysmans's *snobbery*, abstain from the Goncourt *Journal*, dream supine in the grass,

...et puis
Faire des ronds en crachant dans un puits…

[...and then / Make circles spitting in a well…]

Wherewith, Gentlemen, *farewell*!

Harold Swan.

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To round out the portrait I've sketched of Harold Swan, one might think it apt to reproduce selections from the *Nocturnes selon Paris*. But on consideration, I'll refrain—the *Nocturnes* being readily

discoverable in *La Plume*'s archives from 1892-93 and having already graced the pages of sundry periodicals both French and foreign.

I prefer to conclude with a brief poem that demonstrates how our pseudo young gentleman construed the art of versification.

BALLADE OF THE LITTLE NOTEBOOK

To M. Stuart Merrill.

Mon âme est un vélin que hante
Tout un peuple bariolé:
Mélusine, Aude, Violante,
Et Mab au rire constellé;
Puis encor—fantômes qu'enlève
Un Eros chevauchant un bouc—
Quelques Lilith, deux ou trois Eve:
I am a little copy-book.

[My soul's a vellum haunted through
By all a motley company:
Mélusine, Aude, Violante too,
And Mab whose laugh's a galaxy;
Then more—pale phantoms spirited away
By Eros mounted on a goat—
Some Liliths, Eves both two and three
I am a little copy-book.]

Elfe blanc, toi nixe méchante,
Et toi kobold scandalisé
Par leur allure équivalente.
Et toi, Promise à mon baiser,
Fleur où la lune a mis sa sève.
Enfant des djinns bleus, Lalla-Rookh,
Illustrez un songe suave:
I am a little copy-book.

[White elf, and you, malicious nix,
And you, kobold, scandalised
By how equivalently they mix.
And you, my kiss's promised prize,
Flower where the moon has stored her sap.

Child of blue djinns, Lalla-Rookh,
Come illustrate a gentle dream:
I am a little copy-book.]

Un gala de fête galante
Baigné d'odeurs et de clarté.
Autour de mon âme accueillante
Pour qui mensonge est vérité.
S'agite sans repos ni trêve;
Plutôt qu'un tome de Panckouck
Cette fête veut qu'on l'achève:
I am a little copy-book.

[A gala fête of gallantry
Awash in perfume and in light.
Around my soul's hospitality
Where lies transform themselves to right.
It churns without reprieve or rest;
Better than any Panckouck tome,
This festival demands its end:
I am a little copy-book.]

ENVOI

Princesse, m'aie en ta felouque
Le flot qui porte à d'autres grèves
Les feuillets épars de mes rêves:
I am a little copy-book.

[Princess, bear me in your barque
Upon the wave that carries far
To other shores my dreams' loose leaves:
I am a little copy-book.]

Harold Swan.

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You see that Symbolism was hardly that coven of lugubrious, depraved aesthetes whose morals and style the jaundiced Fouquiers[42] denounced with such vehemence. We knew how to laugh. Nor was I alone in such jesting. The *Entretiens* contain notes of wit that yield nothing to the *Propos épars*.

As for our fine fellowship, M. Mazel wrote to me recently in a letter whose essential passage runs thus: "How right you are to recall, as you mention in your letter, those splendid evenings at *L'Ermitage*. What a glorious era of ardent conviction and pure devotion to art! I never think of it without pleasure. And I've preserved the same affection for all our old *Hermits* of those days."

The Soirées of La Plume

La Plume was Léon Deschamps. This book would be incomplete without honouring that stalwart champion who, with the slenderest of resources at the outset, set about bringing recognition and remuneration to writers and artists, several of whom might well have languished in obscurity without him. For my part, I proclaim it proudly: he encouraged me, sustained me, defended me, and helped me through the lean years. When my critical campaigns were raising hackles on all sides, when certain parties were pressing him to shut me out of his review—*even dangling money before him to show me the door*—he never wavered in declaring that I should have my say, and he would repeat: "Follow your path, press on with your articles in the spirit you've begun. Write books: I'll publish them. And be certain that I shall never abandon you."

He was as good as his word. Which is why I can do no less than reproduce here some lines from the dedication I inscribed to him in my book *Aspects*: "Strict justice, as well as my friendship, demands, my dear Deschamps, that I dedicate this book to you. When you entrusted me with voicing opinions on contemporary literary production in *La Plume*, you stipulated: 'It goes without saying that you'll write exactly as you please.' You never reneged on that promise. Neither your review's ban in Russia, nor the insinuations of certain 'dear colleagues', nor the protestations of 'devoted readers' scandalised by my cynicism ever made you falter. With you I've enjoyed a freedom that would have been granted nowhere else."

Robust, naturally buoyant, well-armoured against the petty malice of literary circles, Deschamps was also an indefatigable worker. The review was his life: he gave it his all; and of each day's twenty-four hours, he invariably devoted at least twelve to developing and perfecting his enterprise. Hence a success richly deserved. Through him, *La Plume*—at once combative, lyrical and irreverent—shaped contemporary literature more profoundly than any other periodical of our time.

Deschamps died in harness. Yet at least he departed for the shades with the satisfaction of having served the writers of his generation with honour and valour.

Moreover, in an open letter to his lieutenant Léon Maillard, published in *La Plume* at the close of 1892, he himself set forth the achievements to date and his plans for the future—nearly all of which came to fruition. Best to give him the floor.

"In penning this article, which must close the fourth volume of *La Plume* and herald our review's fifth year, my sole thought, dearest friend, is to submit my conduct to your judgement. You know my soul as I cherish yours: we are made to understand one another.

"You know too how I detest affectation and what sincerity infuses my words. So I shan't remind you that this work is wrought from my blood, from the finest portion of my life. For two years, as you know, it meant crushing toil, a daily precipice, a gaping abyss that swallowed all my savings, with the sole tangible result a storm of calumny that has frosted my young temples...

"Yet despite the tempest, we all sensed the harbour approaching and better days dawning: we unfurled every sail... Today success has surpassed our hopes.

"You've never doubted that our motto—'For art!'—is our sole guiding principle. Could I have erred in its application, when after four years of struggle, and against all precedent, victory already seems within our grasp? Have I unknowingly pandered to the *barbarous* public, or rather, as I've always believed, are there sufficient enlightened souls in this world capable of supporting an endeavour to rejuvenate and fortify art?

"I desired the advent of the new generations, and to that end:

"a) Created for all—painters, engravers, sculptors and men of letters—a weapon for the struggle, a tool of propaganda that strikes where it must—amongst artists; the rest are no concern of ours (the review *La Plume*);

"b) Battle-hardened the combatants by enabling them to address a discerning audience directly and test their works there (*Soirées de La Plume*);

"c) Formed an anthology of rare works by new writers alone, illustrated by select artists still unknown to the public: Rops, Redon, Luce, Desboutin, and others (*Bibliothèque Artistique et Littéraire*), and through this venture's success, demonstrated to publishers that their tottering houses' salvation lies in embracing our young comrades;

"d) Banished acrimony and vituperation from *literary* and *artistic* debate; effected a sea change in relations between masters and newcomers; replaced mockery of our elders with affectionate respect; and finally, fostered a fusion of old and young, granting the latter entrée to editorial sanctums and publishing houses (*Banquets de La Plume*);

"e) Revived amongst us the cult of the masters, despite hostile indifference or partisan spirit (*Subscription for Verlaine in hospital and for the Baudelaire Monument*).

"To demonstrate the publication's complete independence, I've refrained from pushing myself forward: an editor-in-chief, in my view, should select the contributors, not join their ranks—save to *deputise* for any contributor, to dash off *at the eleventh hour* (forgive the clumsy metaphor) a missing piece. Everything I've published here was *eleventh-hour* work, lines scrawled in haste to prevent delaying an issue.

"An editor who writes regularly for his review risks:

"If talented, creating a publication subordinate to his person and consequently closed to worthy contributions from outsiders;

"If talentless, since he necessarily covets pride of place, being forced, to maintain that position, to surround himself with mediocrities.

"Either way, the work suffers. It becomes either Villemessant's *Figaro* or Rochefort's *l'Intransigeant*. No middle ground exists.

"By proceeding as I have, I alone shoulder the position's drawbacks. Simple fools—I've no time for the malicious—vexed by the studied silence we accord them, spread the notion that X... is a failure, *since he doesn't write for his own review*! As if X... weren't at liberty to run his prose or verse at home rather than placing them elsewhere!

"But for myself and my colleagues at the *Mercure*, the *Entretiens* and *l'Ermitage*, rousing the ire of cretins is proof positive that one is fulfilling one's mission—and doing one's duty entire."

These lines capture Deschamps's achievement so perfectly and illuminate his integrity and selfless devotion to art so clearly that I've nothing to add. So I'll proceed, without further comment, to those celebrated soirées of *La Plume*.

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Ernest Raynaud, accomplished poet and loyal friend to Deschamps, has chronicled in a recent piece the genesis of these soirées and of *La Plume* itself. As his account rings true, I'll cite several passages.

"It was late summer 1889, six months after *La Plume*'s birth," Raynaud tells us, "that Léon Deschamps hit upon gathering artists and poets every Saturday evening to—as Maillard delightfully put it—*add a note of genuine art to the cosmopolitan din of the Universal Exhibition*. The first gatherings convened at the Café de Fleurus, but we soon needed larger quarters. The basement of the Café de l'Avenir, on the Place Saint-Michel at the quay's corner, was selected.

"Success came swiftly and decisively. Such ventures had previously enjoyed only fleeting existence, despite the enduring names attached to them. They had come too soon. Nevertheless, they had broken ground. When Deschamps appeared, the moment was ripe. Change was in the air.

"The prevailing spirit then was a crude jingoism laced with mawkish sentiment and complacent ignorance. The café-concert reigned supreme. Paulus and Déroulède held sway over the masses and satisfied their hunger for beauty. Gandillot blazed in glory whilst Francisque Sarcey, championing common sense and good old Gallic mirth, imposed his mediocre ideal. Armand Silvestre fancied that wallowing in smut sufficed to match our old bawdy storytellers. Jean Richepin's imitators worked the argot to death. The naturalist novelists, in the name of truth, studied only the human animal, and their insistence on viewing everything through a brutal lens inevitably provoked a backlash. The school of the human document, which reduced psychology to mere instinct, was bound to give way to an art of dreams, all subtlety and suggestion. Minds glutted with naturalism felt stirring within them a yearning for the ideal. Life no longer struck them as a dreary parade of faits divers but as an enchanted, ordered realm where every flower inscribed a symbol. The sense of mystery was reawakening. One felt, in short, the need for something different, without yet knowing what form it would take. These new currents had already surfaced once or twice without achieving clear definition."

Raynaud then catalogues the ephemeral journals where innovators cut their teeth in their twenties, before continuing: "*La Plume* appeared at this juncture. Handy in format and gentle on the purse, it was catholic in taste…[9] It became the thread connecting all these scattered avant-garde sheets. It was that, and more besides, for not content with literature alone, it embraced all the arts; it mounted special issues for provincial poetry circles, thereby propelling the decentralist movement that so engages young minds today. It showcased painters, sculptors and artisans. It addressed sociology and music. It even boasted a theatre of legends.

No manifestation of the intellect remained beyond its scope. It was unabashedly revolutionary, yet revolutionary with verve and good cheer. It even welcomed the chanson, knowing that in the land of France, the song alone consecrates and nothing endures without it. It became, thereby, a superb vehicle for spreading the word...

At its soirées, one witnessed minds as diverse as Jean Moréas, Rachilde, Félix Fénéon, Gabriel Vicaire, Paul Roinard, Albert Samain, Paul Adam, Pierre Louÿs, Camille Lemonnier, and Krysinska fraternising over their drinks."

Shall we attend one of these sessions? Nine o'clock strikes. Cohorts of students, poets, and artists stream down from Montparnasse, Montmartre and the Batignolles, flooding into the café... Don't pause—cross the room, descend the stairs plunging underground; push through the door before

you. You freeze on the threshold, overwhelmed by the din, the heat, the fog of smoke. An extraordinary scene unfolds.

A long, crooked vault of masonry teems with animated, jostling humanity. Two harried, bewildered waiters struggle to field the barrage of orders and demands, weaving through the maze of chairs and tables bristling with beer glasses. Where forty souls would scarcely fit comfortably, you see one hundred and fifty to two hundred packed like sardines... At the far end, a miniature stage framed by painted wooden drapes; rough brushstrokes on the rear wall suggest a seascape beneath a symbolic moon. To the left, a recalcitrant piano. By the stage, a dais where president Léon Deschamps holds court (pipe and smile at the ready), flanked by Maillard and Louis Miot, *his twin pillars*, as future deputy Lucien Hubert cleverly notes...

How unpretentious these gatherings, how warm, suffused with fraternal bonhomie—how different from the Chat Noir, where art swiftly descends into bluff and travesty! At *La Plume*, *one feels at home*. Everywhere, in every nook, at every table, familiar faces, friendly heads who've come purely to hear poetry...

Aurélien Scholl observed of these soirées: "One must witness this exuberant youth flowering at these fraternal gatherings. The frank, open countenances, the hearty handclasps! Envy is alien to these warriors; each celebrates the others' triumphs. They sense themselves ascending together."

Indeed, Scholl, ever sympathetic to our cause, penned the preface to the slim volume adorned with a hundred portraits in which Maillard chronicled the soirées of *La Plume*: *La Lutte idéale*.

It was regarding this book that Harold Swan, unable to remain aloof from this literary maelstrom, published in *l'Ermitage* the most successful of his *Propos épars*. I reproduce it below. It will round out our portrait of the soirées of *La Plume*.

LA PLUME

Tavern-haunting corpses! Debauchees of the public house!

(Thus spake M. Henri Fouquier, scribe to *Le Figaro*
and practitioner of Attic wit)

When first I took ship for France—whilst the packet gulped down avalanche upon avalanche of trunks and portmanteaux, and the December squall spat brine into our faces—my venerable father, the *Hon*. Richard E. Swan *Esq*., standing beside me on Dover pier, brought to its close the address he had been delivering with these words: "*And now, Harold, I have but one thing more to say: you were not born with a silver spoon in your mouth; beware of French men of letters*."

"Really, Father," I rejoined, "I fear you rather overstate my want of worldliness. Granted, I am scarcely six-and-twenty, yet thanks to your solicitude, I have endured Eton, where I served as *fag* to His Grace the Duke of Sheepshead, who was liberal with his cuffs and clouts whenever my boot-blacking fell short of perfection. I pulled a glorious oar at Cambridge. And latterly, I made the acquaintance of

Mr Oscar Wilde, who presented me with his portrait and a golden sunflower! Surely all this entitles me to claim some knowledge of the world?"

Mr Swan held his peace at first; a broad and ambiguous smile cracked his face from ear to ear. At length, after some minutes: "Off to Paris with you, my boy," said he, "but mind you don't forget: first, what I've just told you, and second, that there shall always be cold mutton and a pot of ale awaiting you at Swan Castle. God speed."

He wrung my hand in the heartiest English manner, and off I went, bearing a five-act adaptation of the tragedy *Le géant Agrapardo, roi de Nubie, pire que son frère feu Angulafer*[10], intended for the Théâtre de l'Odéon, and a letter of introduction from Lord Glenarvon of Argyll, of the Dukes of Montrose, commending me to one M. Adolphe Retté, French man of letters.

My crossing offered nothing worthy of record. Upon traversing the concourse of the Gare Saint-Lazare in Paris, my eye was arrested by an immense yellow placard proclaiming:

Behold:

La Plume!

La Plume!!

La Plume!!!

"I say," I enquired of a personage sporting a magnificently braided cap, who appeared to be standing guard over this advertisement, "what might this inscription signify?"

"Haven't the foggiest," came the reply. "Though it might concern a pudding recipe. You'd best enquire elsewhere."

I shall do precisely that, thought I, climbing into a cab, particularly as this fellow strikes me as singularly obtuse... No doubt it's some literary manifestation, or perhaps a feather-merchant's concern, or else an American tar-and-feathering enterprise that quite eclipses the japes of my dear Edgar Poe.

The cab conveyed me to M. Adolphe Retté's quarters, where I was ushered into a sort of study thick with dust. Books, manuscripts, musical scores, sketches, hats of every description, riding crops, a pair of spurs, a *banjo*, flowers both fresh and withered—all lay heaped upon table, chairs, and divan in indescribable chaos, whilst a tribe of cats contributed to the disorder by chasing one another from perch to perch, yowling, spitting, and clawing all the while.

A lanky devil with remarkably dilated pupils and hair standing on end, clad solely in flannel shirt and drawers, erupted through a door flung suddenly open. Without ceremony, he snatched the letter I was extending whilst I stammered out the customary civilities, and fell to pacing the floor, now and then aiming a kick at the cats, adjusting the pince-nez astride his nose, pulling the most alarming faces, and all the while perusing my letter.

When he had done, he dropped into a chair facing mine and demanded: "You know Glenarvon?"

"Somewhat," I allowed.

"Capital fellow... So you've come to study Paris and her literati?"

I owned that such was indeed my intention.

"Capital fellows all... What else?"

I laid before him the full catalogue of my aspirations and ambitions, my inclinations and curiosities, not forgetting Oscar Wilde and my tragedy. He heard me out in silence, raking his fingers through his hair, rolling cigarettes—not one of which he offered me—and above all yawning every third minute fit to unhinge his jaw, so that I set him down as abominably ill-bred, an assessment I have since had no cause to revise.

At last I wound up by enquiring what this *Plume* might be that so brazenly accosted arrivals at the Gare Saint-Lazare.

"Good God!" he cried, starting from his chair. "You don't know *La Plume*? What the devil do you island-dwellers occupy yourselves with?"

I mumbled something about my ignorance and ventured, rather feebly, to mention the braided fellow's hypothesis.

M. Retté flung himself back and burst into an enormous soundless laugh that exposed the entirety of his gullet.

When he had composed himself: "That man," he pronounced, "shows remarkable wisdom. Indeed, *La Plume* is a *pudding*."

With which we parted, agreeing to meet that evening.

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Come evening, M. Retté escorted me to a modest eating-house near the Odéon, where he did me the honour of introductions to: M. Stuart Merrill, who discoursed upon Japanese textiles; Jean Moréas, who sang the praises of Mediterranean cockles; Gaston Dubreuilh, a musician, who inveighed bitterly against flat-brimmed hats; Hugues Rebell, who described Hyde Park to me—though I fancy I know it rather better than he; and Frédéric Corbier, a taciturn mathematician who contributed but a single utterance the entire meal: "Here's to joy and all her daughters!"—delivered in the most sepulchral tones. M. Retté himself regaled M. Dubreuilh with an account of the Battle of Cannes, seasoning his narrative with the most execrable puns and wordplay. Of literature or art, not a syllable. Only the *gentleman* who attended us ventured some literary observations, though these went largely unheeded. From him, however, I gathered that *La Plume* was a literary, artistic, and social review in which these gentlemen occasionally condescended to manifest themselves through verses of inevitable sublimity and prose pieces sharp-tongued towards outsiders, adulatory towards one another, yet often as sharp as adulatory. This definition, set against M. Retté's, left me thoroughly puzzled. The waiter helpfully added that *La Plume* held gatherings every Saturday in a vast subterranean hall at the foot of the Boulevard Saint-Michel. "Poets and chansonnniers perform there quite freely," he confided with a knowing wink.

I advised M. Retté that I now understood what *La Plume* was and should very much like to further my acquaintance with this review.

"Capital," said he. "Today being Saturday, we shall go there directly."

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This interminable preamble serves to explain how I came to encounter a collection of "tavern-haunting corpses and public-house debauchees"—to borrow M. Fouquier's extraordinary phrase. To convey my impressions would tax my powers. Picture this: clouds of smoke, a perfect din, a consumptive piano, a piercing bell, and a tremendous roar greeting our arrival. A palace? Nothing of the sort—rather, three hundred souls crammed where a hundred might barely fit with any comfort. A genial and commanding president, M. Deschamps. And then a deluge, a cataract, a very Niagara of poems and songs, some declaimed, others sung (after a fashion) by fifty or so specimens of rude health and touching innocence. To name names would be tedious: M. Bailliot delivered splendid verses by Moréas; M. Dalibard offered pieces by Signoret, Le Cardonnel, Retté, Charles Morice, and Victor Hugo; M. Coulon rhapsodised over M. du Plessys's attire; M. Degron warbled *Les Bois*... Of the macabre, not a whiff; of Heliogabalus and houses of ill repute, not a trace. M. Canqueteau, perhaps? Yet even he was merely championing the Bibliothèque Nationale.

My conclusion—sound, I believe—was that M. Henri Fouquier must be a thoroughly scurrilous journalist.

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These soirées have been chronicled with a ready pen—a ready *Plume*, indeed—by M. Léon Maillard in a pamphlet he was gracious enough to present me. M. Maillard is a compact, sprightly fellow with quick, searching eyes and animated gestures, and none could have done more to advance *La Plume*'s fortunes than he, who stood as M. Léon Deschamps's right hand from the very beginning. These two firebrands, these zealots, have brought forth *Le Journal des Jeunes*; they have commanded attention; they have won respect; they are acquiring real influence—why, M. Claretie and M. Coppée of the Académie française (*sic*) now preside at their monthly dinners.

An observation—I shouldn't call it criticism: to judge from the portraits dotting M. Maillard's pamphlet, the young writers, songsters, and artists are, by and large, uncommonly plain—save for Messieurs Alphonse Germain and René Tardivaux, who are decidedly handsome, though we hardly needed telling.

A parting word on M. Maillard: he possesses an intimate knowledge of the Louvre and discourses most sensibly on painting... For which I confess myself exceedingly fond of him.

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POSTSCRIPTUM — 1° The Odéon has rejected my tragedy: M. Porel reveals himself a most singular gentleman, for... but that's a tale for another day;

2° A friend enquires why M. Retté endorsed calling *La Plume* a pudding. I have not enlightened him, being myself entirely in the dark. Should anyone care to illuminate this mystery, I should be vastly obliged, as I dare not approach M. Retté, of whom I am decidedly wary: the poet would surely ensnare me in one of those frigid jests he so favours;

3° And now, Griselda, dear mercenary creature, come away; tuck these chrysanthemums in your sash and let us see whether the Luxembourg still wears its autumn gold. I had hoped my tragedy would tread the boards; then I should have laid provinces and kingdoms at your feet, sweet *miss*... Smoke and vapour! Fame vanished... my tragedy having miscarried, *we have kissed away kingdoms and provinces*! as Shakespeare has it.

Harold Swan.

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The banquets that alternated with the soirées proved equally triumphant. They were presided over in turn by Puvis de Chavannes, Reyer, Leconte de l'Isle, Mallarmé, Verlaine, Coppée, de Heredia, Jules Claretie, Émile Zola, Auguste Vacquerie, Francis Magnard, and others.

Concerning this last banquet, Jean Carrère—in an article where he does his former brothers-in-arms a grave disservice by imputing to them attitudes they never held—has nonetheless provided some witty observations on Magnard's bearing.

"Magnard," he writes, "approached the whole affair with the seasoned eye of an old Parisian, his small eyes glittering at this kaleidoscope of men and ideas. He watched the most intriguing characters parade past, demanding anecdotes about each. One peculiar type caught his fancy—a grave gentleman with a protective smile, meticulously groomed beard and impeccable attire, whom the young people hailed with easy familiarity.

'Who on earth is that curious specimen?' Magnard asked me.

'Paul Masson. Though you'd know him better as Lemice-Térieux.'

'Lemice-Térieux? The notorious hoaxer? He looks like a retired magistrate!'

'Precisely what he is—former prosecutor-general in French India.'

'Good Lord! How extraordinary! You must introduce us.'

Indeed, at that time Lemice-Térieux's pranks were the talk of the press. With his customary smile and perfect correctness, Paul Masson approached Magnard, who offered his compliments.

'You're quite celebrated, Monsieur,' declared the director of *Le Figaro*. 'What news can you give me? I'll publish whatever you care to announce.'

'Splendid,' said Lemice-Térieux. 'Tomorrow you may announce my candidacy for the Academy.'

Magnard was momentarily stunned, but rallied swiftly. A promise given is a promise kept. The following day, *Le Figaro* duly announced Lemice-Térieux's candidacy, and the day after, Paul Masson commenced his rounds, beginning with M. Othenin d'Haussonville."

Masson, who died recently, really was a rum character. Cold and methodical, he orchestrated monumental hoaxes that threw the newspapers into uproar. He had elevated the bogus news story to unprecedented heights. Meanwhile, he was publishing in *L'Ermitage* his *Pensées d'un Yoghi*, some of which are delightfully droll.

Here are three specimens:

"Les poètes nous ont gâté la nature. Dans le plus beau fruit, maintenant, il y a un ver."

[The poets have ruined nature for us. Now even the finest fruit harbours a worm.]

"*Je ne sais pourquoi la foi du charbonnier me paraît toujours un peu intéressée. N'aura-t-il pas à alimenter les feux éternels?*"

[I can't help thinking the coalman's faith seems rather self-serving. Won't he be stoking the eternal fires?]

"*Tout objet précieux gagne à être isolé. Nul repoussoir ne vaut un reposoir.*"

[Every precious object benefits from standing alone. No foil can match a proper pedestal.]

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The three banquets that remain most vividly etched in my memory were those chaired by Jules Claretie, de Heredia, and Zola.

M. Claretie displayed admirable grace and warmth. Unlike most of his predecessors or successors, who initially appeared rather ill at ease—so legendary was our reputation for ferocity and uncompromising militancy—he proved immediately comfortable.

"Well now," he remarked to his neighbour, "these young men aren't the wild-eyed, shaggy bohemians I'd been warned about... I dare say I'll escape with my hide intact."

His toast reflected this felicitous mood. Here's how he concluded: "I await from you, contributors to *La Plume*—whose young names posterity will discover, transformed into household words, in M. Deschamps's review—both works and masterpieces... Yes, bring me bold comedies, magnificent five-act verse dramas and... I nearly forgot!... —subject to the Committee's blessing—we shall have them applauded."

This conclusion, with its sly qualification, met with the response it deserved: unanimous applause and laughter. Yet I cannot recall any of us taking him up on the offer to submit dramas for the consideration of M. Coquelin cadet or Mlle Reichemberg. Only Jean Moréas, I believe, contemplated presenting his splendid tragedy *Iphigénie* to the Comédie-Française. And even that remained merely a thought, never pursued.

Jean Carrère was therefore quite mistaken when he wrote in the article I've quoted: "That evening, the entire youth departed lost in thought. For a month, the quarter turned melancholy and the brasseries stood empty. By night, around the Panthéon and the Luxembourg, lights burned in every garret window. The whole Left Bank was mysteriously perfecting verse dramas."

Carrère's a decent fellow who possesses both wit and imagination in abundance. Yet whenever he writes about the heroic days of Symbolism, one would think he feels compelled to atone for having once believed in art and principled conviction. He strikes a jocular note; he strives to amuse his readers at the expense of poets who, even the least among them, possessed this virtue at minimum: they were true believers. This want of backbone demands reproach. Let Carrère make no mistake: if we ultimately prevailed, it was because we always, even in our merriment, maintained respect for our art. We were neither attention-seeking marionettes nor clowns obsessed with shocking the bourgeoisie. If hack journalists choose to pen preposterous appraisals of our position, that's their affair and scarcely signifies. But Carrère, who once harboured ambitions of becoming a serious poet, ought to remember his former ardour and abstain from such capering...

Among our most thoroughly intimidated presidents was the Master of *Les Trophées*, José-Maria de Heredia. We had so relentlessly harried the Parnassians that, despite our assured and fundamental admiration for his exquisite sonnets, he seemed to fear we might demand his head with the dessert, following some invocation to free verse. There was another factor too. During his presidency, *La Plume* was deeply committed to socialism and publishing inflammatory articles against the established order. M. de Heredia is a man of peaceful disposition, better versed in the art of prosody than revolutionary rhetoric. Thus, whenever he was introduced to some lyricist with anarchist sympathies, he would hurriedly declare: "I appreciate the poet in you, purely the poet."

Our genuine good humour and conviviality soon allayed his anxieties. It was at this very banquet, I should add, that I established with him a connection that has remained wonderfully cordial. As evidence, I offer the delightfully witty letter he sent upon receiving *L'Archipel en fleurs*. I believe it merits reproduction here.

Paris, 5 March 1895.

My dear poet,

Having concluded the arduous journey required through M. de Mazade's work, which duty obliges me to praise, I've rewarded myself by strolling through *L'Archipel en fleurs* "where charm resides alongside ancient wonders" and modern ones too—harmonies, fragrances, and hues.

By "ancient wonder" do you mean the alexandrine, which you so roundly chastise in your preface whilst employing it so skilfully and liberally throughout your book?...

Undoubtedly the alexandrine is a wonder, for despite its venerable age, it remains eternally youthful, capable of perpetual renewal in the hands of a true poet.

You demonstrate this admirably, my dear Retté, and your verses constitute the finest rebuttal I could marshal against your own arguments.

With warmest thanks for the pleasure you've afforded me, I clasp your hand most cordially, poet doubly Alexandrine,

Yours:

J. M. DE HEREDIA.

Zola's demeanour at the banquet he chaired proved fascinating to observe. He surveyed us with unmistakable defiance, as though bracing for an onslaught requiring his full reserves to repel. He spoke sparingly, occasionally consulting Aurélien Scholl, his neighbour, about the assembled company, then, brow deeply furrowed, withdrew into silence. Pugnacious by nature, he was visibly restraining himself from delivering crushing blows. Nevertheless, his toast proved gracious. "I drink," he concluded, "to the renewal of every formula; I drink to the art of tomorrow, which must necessarily differ from what we have offered; I drink to all the innovations you will bring forth; I even drink to burying your elders —but I entreat you to grant them a handsome funeral..."

Following the banquet, conversation flowed. Zola, somewhat mellowed by our cordiality, addressed those of us gathered round: "What puzzles me is that you don't appear entirely certain what you're after. You attack us, but what would you establish in place of our art?"

"Several things," I responded. "First, to restore poetry to its rightful station in literature. You realists accord no value to verse. We aim to demonstrate that it equals prose, if not surpasses it, for conveying profound emotion. We seek also to cultivate an art of ideas and sentiment to counter your art of somewhat raw sensation. Finally, we wish to accommodate mystery and dreams."

Zola listened intently. When I concluded, he remained silent for some time, brow knitted. Then, with a challenging gesture, he declared: "What you propose to do, I shall accomplish myself..."

"*I rather doubt it*," I replied with a slight bow.

This exchange, quite inaccurately reported by Carrère in the aforementioned piece, appeared in countless newspapers the following day. It created considerable buzz, which is why I've thought it worth recording here.

Moreover, I soon afterwards entered into regular correspondence with Zola, as the next chapter will reveal.

Reminiscences of Émile Zola

The letter from Émile Zola which I publish below forms a document of exceptional interest for the history of French letters in recent years. To bring out its full significance, I must venture into some background and speak of myself, for it was the spark that lit my sustained relationship with the great writer and led to the notes you are about to read.

In the course of our conversations, Zola entrusted me with a wealth of insights into the criticisms levelled at his work, his methods during the Dreyfus Affair, his vision for the final volume of the *Quatre Évangiles* series—*Justice*, which death would deny him the chance to write—and his plans for what lay ahead.

With his blessing, I took notes. Some have seen print—those concerning the Affair—and Zola was gracious enough to say they rendered his thoughts with perfect fidelity. Others have remained in my drawer until now. I can vouch that they preserve Zola's very words.

When *Symbolism* first flexed its muscles, its champions laid into naturalism with considerable vigour. I myself had taken aim at Zola's artistic doctrine in various articles where, I confess today, passion rather got the better of fairness. Yet the deeper I delved into the work of the author of *Les Rougon-Macquart*, the more my youthful prejudices began to crumble. When *Rome* finally appeared, I determined to give it the thorough examination it deserved—one that would honour the Master's Herculean labours and the pulsing vitality of his books, whilst not shying away from certain reservations. *La Plume* published this study, in which I dissected *Rome* at length. I strove to counter some of the barbs thrown by the Spiritualist camp. I brought the work's strengths to the fore. Yet I also challenged an opinion attributed to Zola by a journalist in a recent *interview*. The reporter had him claiming that critics barely troubled him and that his only yardstick was robust book sales.

My response ran thus: "If certain people snap up M. Zola's books in droves, perhaps it's for reasons that have precious little to do with literature—hunting, for instance, for those crudities and indecencies which his detractors, in patent bad faith, accuse him of piling on. One might remind him of his own words about the booming sales of serialised novels: 'Primers sell well too.' I would simply observe that countless books can only speak to a more select readership than those who gravitate towards novels. Does he imagine, say, that Darwin's *Origin of Species* commands a vast audience? Does its modest circulation rob it of one jot of its import? To credit M. Zola with such a view would be to do him a grave disservice..."

Towards the end of my piece, I touched on Zola's dogged pursuit of the Académie despite repeated rebuffs, setting his persistence against his own earlier pronouncements on that institution. I quoted, amongst other choice passages, these lines from *Le Roman Expérimental*: "Such an institution cannot possibly matter in a nation's literary life; it possesses neither meaning, nor influence, nor consequence of any kind... It remains nothing but empty vainglory."

Why then, I asked, chase after this vainglory?

The article came out in June 1896. By return of post came the following letter, which I reproduce in its entirety:

Médan, 4 July 1896.

Dear Sir and fellow writer,

I read with keen interest and genuine pleasure your article on Rome. Naturally, the praise delights me and I thank you for it; but my satisfaction runs far deeper at seeing some measure of truth and justice accorded to works that cease to be mine the moment I release them to the public. They are twisted out of all recognition too often, and your efforts to restore them to their true light pleased me all the more coming from a young writer in the thick of the fight who has, until now, rather stood against me.

But how on earth can you believe I measure works solely by the scales of success? What utter nonsense. I never said it; I never thought it. I have always held success in contempt and have spoken of how suspect and damaging it can prove. People really do saddle me with too many idiocies and shabby motives!

— As for the Academy business, that's rather more tangled, and the devil of it is that I choose to hold my tongue—indeed, I must. I'm like those wronged innocents in melodramas who could clear themselves with a single word but whom reasons of state compel to silence.

My thanks once more, and please believe me your most cordial and devoted

Émile Zola.

Thrilled by this letter, I rushed into print with a correction in *La Plume* regarding the reporter's mangling of Zola's words. Then I paid the Master a visit.

During our meeting, I tried to draw Zola out on his Academy candidacy. But he kept his cards close to his chest, letting slip only that he intended to show the Academy up right to the bitter end.

"After all," I ventured, "the Institut is giving you the Balzac treatment. That's a badge of honour, surely."

Zola smiled and shook his head in silence.

From then on, I saw him with some regularity. But of all our meetings, the one that stays with me most vividly took place shortly after his return from England, in October 1899.

Fécondité had just come out and Zola had sent me a copy. I called to thank him and found him thoroughly vexed by the brickbats being hurled at his book.

"The subject of *Fécondité* had been brewing in my mind for ages," he confided. "Originally, I planned to call it *Le Déchet*—The Waste—and I hadn't yet hit upon the idea of setting against Malthusian practices the counter-example of a family that refused to cheat nature, where abundant offspring would spell prosperity rather than ruin. *Le Déchet* would have painted an unrelievedly grim picture that might have left readers thoroughly dispirited. Only after finishing *Les Trois Villes* did my thinking shift. I decided to offer the cure alongside the disease—hence the book as you now have it."

"And yet I've still been accused of exaggerating. Philippe Gille, in *Le Figaro*, has taken me to task for inflating the figures, for overstating the number of women who submit to ovariotomy. Well, I can assure you I've done quite the opposite—I've toned things down. Indeed, I haven't revealed the

half of it. You know how scrupulously I document my work. I've consulted the official statistics; I've questioned the relevant authorities; I've studied the specialist literature; I've even visited wet-nurse bureaux and midwifery practices. In short, I've proceeded from rigorous and irrefutable data. On this point, I challenge anyone to prove me wrong. The plague exists exactly as I've depicted it..."
I then enquired whether Zola's involvement in the Affair—his trials and exile—hadn't hindered his work.

His response offered fascinating insights into both his extraordinary willpower and his working methods.

"It was late December 1897 when I began compiling the dossier for *Fécondité*. No trifling task! I first drafted a general outline and drew up synoptic charts to keep track of Mathieu Froment's twelve children. When my first trial came round, I was deep in preparatory work. Improbable though it may seem, I managed to split myself in two, so to speak, and succeeded in advancing both my novel's groundwork and the Dreyfus campaign in tandem.

"By the time of the Versailles trial, my plan was complete. The book's architecture stood ready, and I was poised to begin the first chapter. But since I half-expected to be arrested, I'd instructed my wife: 'Should they clap me in prison immediately, gather all my papers and bring them to me...'

"Not having been arrested, I was preparing to press on. But then someone warned me I was courting danger by remaining in Paris, and I resolved to leave France...

"Perhaps it was the prudent course. Though I must confess, I wouldn't have minded being locked up... Not in the least! Prison strikes me as rather conducive to work. Besides, I'd have known fresh sensations.

"At any rate, I heeded the advice. I departed abruptly for London, without my papers, without so much as a change of linen. At my hotel, I was recognised almost at once. Dreading the *reporters* and craving peace above all else, I retreated to the outskirts of London and, under the name Beauchamp, established myself first in a secluded cottage, then at Norwood near Sydenham. There I took rooms in a hotel where they gave me the very suite Emperor Frederick had occupied when he came incognito to consult English physicians about his cancer.

"Only my wife and one friend knew my whereabouts. They forwarded my dossier and some necessities. In perfect tranquillity, I set to work. I began the first chapter on 4th August 1898. I marked the date because I wanted to test whether my other concerns might impede my usual daily output. Everything went splendidly. I read no newspapers; I saw no one. I was wholly absorbed in the pleasure of bringing my characters gradually to life. I wrote all morning, as was my practice in France, and spent the afternoons cycling. Ideal conditions for productive work.

"By early September, I'd completed seven chapters when a telegram arrived announcing Commander Henry's suicide[43]. That truly shattered me. I seized my bicycle and raced off to buy the English papers. But I don't know English, and I dared not question the hotel people lest I betray my identity. I procured a dictionary and grammar and managed—with considerable effort—to piece together the details of this tragic turn of events.

"From then on, I bought the French papers daily. I was consumed with anxiety about how matters would unfold. Had I given in to impulse, I'd have abandoned my book. But I reasoned that it

offered essential distraction. So I persevered, adding my daily three or four pages to the previous day's work. Thus *Fécondité* progressed steadily, until on 27th May 1899, I could write 'The End' beneath my manuscript.

"On 4th June, I returned to France and immediately delivered the book to the printers."

I asked Zola about his plans for the three remaining volumes that would complete, with *Fécondité*, the *Quatre Évangiles* series.

"The truth is," he replied, "I don't properly consider my books until shortly before I begin writing. Then I carry the subject about with me, walking extensively whilst turning it over and over in my mind. As I've just explained regarding *Fécondité*, I sometimes alter things at the eleventh hour... The second book will be *Travail*. But here I face something of a quandary. I've already treated mines and factories. Yet that's not the whole of labour: there's also the land. I've just addressed that in *Fécondité*. And previously, as you know, I examined it in the book of that very name. Well, we shall see... Jaurès mentioned the Carmaux glassworks: that might prove interesting. Perhaps I'll sketch the ideal socialist city."

We know, of course, that Zola didn't pursue the Carmaux glassworks idea. *Travail* does, however, present an idealised vision of collectivism.

Nothing could be more captivating than witnessing the genesis of the writer's future works taking shape in his mind. Observing that Zola enjoyed developing his schemes aloud, I enquired about the third volume, *Vérité*, then being serialised in the press.

"As to the subject, I haven't the faintest idea. What I can say is that I might draw upon my observations during the Dreyfus Affair. There's also the matter of combating this barbarous antisemitism that disgraces our nation. Whatever happens, the book will be grounded in science..."

He rose from the armchair where he'd remained seated, toying with a paper knife, and continued, his features assuming an expression of obstinate conviction, his hands carving brief gestures in the air: "Yes, science—for I remain an unwavering believer in science. Despite evolution's sluggish pace and its retreats into the past, science will ultimately furnish the morality and aesthetics of tomorrow's society—greater prosperity, a more expansive vision of life, less hatred amongst men. I shall set it against those doctrines that denounce it as pernicious. I shall demonstrate that it forms the very bedrock of humanity's fruitful endeavour. When one has fashioned a scientific understanding of the universe, one works with joy, one enjoys robust health and happiness.

"Do you honestly believe that without such deep conviction, I could have carried on producing work whilst being pursued by mockery, insults, and slander?"

I agreed with all my heart, admiring the fierce eloquence with which he proclaimed his faith. In that moment, he appeared to me as the very embodiment of the tenacious fighter his polemical works and novels reveal.

At last I asked what he intended for the fourth volume of the series: *Justice*—the one death prevented him from writing, and for which, it seems, he left not a single note. His answer is all the more worth recording.

"I rather think," he said, "that with *Justice*, I shall launch myself into pure utopia. Yes, it will doubtless be a dream of beauty and goodness, the lyrical apotheosis of humanity marching ever onwards towards greater civilisation. I'd pour into it my hopes and all the optimism I possess. I would write, in essence, a great prose poem, suffused with light and gentleness. And then perhaps they'll no longer accuse me of slandering mankind."

"Indeed," I replied, "it would be a dreamlike crown upon the monument to real life you've built."

"Something of that sort..." And Zola, regarding me with a smile, added: "A flight into the realm of fantasy—that suits you, doesn't it, poet?"

"Fantasy has its virtues," I answered, "but what do you intend to do afterwards?"

"Afterwards," said Zola, settling back, "well then, I shall rest. Haven't I earned the right? I dream of settling in the Balearic Islands. It's a magnificent country with a delightful climate. I shall try to forget I was ever anyone of consequence. I'll banish all memory of my struggles, my defeats and victories. I'll spend my final years basking in the sun and contemplating nature in profound peace."

Elbow propped on his armchair, he shaded his eyes with his hand and fell into meditation. Not wishing to disturb the reverie of retreat in which he took such pleasure, I withdrew...

The last time I saw him was April 1900. I recall he had a splendid bouquet of violets and campanulas on his table. One of his dogs lay on the carpet beside him. As we conversed, someone opened the door and Zola's other dog rushed into the room. A battle erupted instantly: the two beasts flew at each other's throats and, amidst furious snarling, began to grapple. Zola rose to separate them. In the movement, he caught the side table where the flowers stood. The vase overturned. Zola gathered up the bouquet and, holding it in one hand, seized the intruder by the scruff with the other and ejected him.

"How curious," he said, resuming his seat. "These two creatures cannot abide one another. We're obliged to keep them apart, for the moment they set eyes on each other, they attack."

I mention this detail because, as is well known, both dogs survived the catastrophe that claimed Zola's life. One was in the bedroom, whilst the other was shut in an adjacent closet. Reading this detail in the newspapers, I recalled the incident that interrupted our conversation and remembered Zola's concluding remark: "Animals," he said, "are sometimes as absurd as men... not often, mind you, since their instinct surpasses our reason in many ways, but sometimes nonetheless."

We then spoke of painting. I expressed my admiration for Manet's portrait of him that graced the billiard room; he replied: "Yes, that portrait isn't bad, though Manet was never truly a great painter; his was an incomplete talent."

This opinion, so baldly stated, rather took me aback, for I recalled numerous passages where Zola had celebrated with enthusiasm the art of Impressionism's champion. I couldn't resist remarking upon it.

"Ah!" he answered, "I was young then, searching everywhere for weapons to defend the doctrine upon which I've built my books. Manet, with his concern for contemporary subjects and his push towards realism, seemed worth championing. But truth be told, his painting has always somewhat

baffled me... And even he was nothing compared to what followed! Since then, we've gone from bad to worse. These days, when I visit the Salons, I'm bewildered. This year, for instance, all the painters see everything in blue: more dreaming, you see, not reality. They have, I fear, a crack in the brain..."

These *verbatim* remarks of Zola's may displease some. But what's to be done? It struck me forcefully that day that he felt genuine repugnance for the tortured art, corrupted by a quest for oddity, in which so many contemporary painters squander themselves.

"Besides," Zola went on, "I simply cannot work up enthusiasm for painting... It's like music—when I listen, I soon grow distracted and my mind wanders elsewhere."

"Yet," I observed, "you passed judgement on several musicians in *L'Œuvre*, and quite accurately too."

"Oh! A friend supplied me with notes. No, you see, painting and music never truly seize me. In reality, I've only ever been passionate about—and remain passionate about—literature alone... And now, everything's become too complicated. Your lot have tried to merge all the arts, to render pictorial and musical impressions through words. That's demanding too much of literature. Each thing in its place, and above all, let us be simple. I cherish simplicity and clarity."

I asked too what he made of the young writers then creating such a stir, who, claiming him as their master, were pursuing a naturist evolution in opposition to symbolism.

"They have fire and good intentions, but they've yet to produce anything truly decisive. And frankly, they don't seem to know quite where they're heading. I find them rather incoherent. But they're young men. And one must always have faith in the young."

As I took my leave, Zola, escorting me out, enquired what occupied me at present. I told him I was composing verse. He pulled a slight face—for undeniably he had little taste for poetry—and said: "Well then, you're working, and quite right too. Work and determination—that's all there is to life."

Those were the last words I heard him utter, never having seen him again. They perfectly encapsulate both his character and his œuvre: relentless toil to achieve solid results; iron will that enabled him to secure, despite setbacks and vilification, a glorious place in French letters. I might have diluted with commentary the confidences he shared with me. But it seemed better to present them unadorned, for offered thus, without gloss or caveat, they can only, I believe, intensify the regrets of those who admire the mighty realist.

Gleanings

Anyone seeking a thorough grounding in Symbolism should consult Rémy de Gourmont's *Livre des Masques*, Vigié-Lecoq's *La Poésie contemporaine*, Gustave Kahn's *Symbolistes et Décadents*, Léautaud and Van Bever's *Poètes d'aujourd'hui*, and my own *Aspects*. These volumes lay out the school's theories in their entirety, present the various shades of opinion it provoked, and supply its bibliography together with biographies of many poets who formed its ranks.

Yet they pass over countless telling details of the sort I've assembled in this book. My aim has been to show the Symbolists in their true colours, freed from the carapace of ridiculous legends foisted upon them. This is what I shall endeavour to do in the pages that follow.

THE THÉÂTRE D'ART

I mentioned, apropos of the banquet chaired by M. Claretie, that the Symbolists had hardly troubled themselves to submit plays to the official theatres. It bears noting that whilst they quite readily cast certain poems in dramatic form, they neglected to develop them for actual staging. There were exceptions, though these came chiefly from the movement's prose writers.

In 1890 a young man burst onto the scene who took it upon himself not only to stage the performable plays but also to have actors, specially trained for the task, declaim from the boards some of these quasi-dramatic poems. This was Paul Fort, who has since published three or four volumes of rhythmic prose of considerable lyric intensity.

This audacious stripling—all of eighteen years old—founded the Théâtre d'Art, which mounted productions in a small hall in the Faubourg-Montmartre, at matinées in the Vaudeville, and at the Théâtre-Montparnasse: Maeterlinck's *L'Intruse* and *Les Aveugles*, Verlaine's *Les Uns et les Autres*, Rachilde's *La Voix du Sang* and *Madame la Mort*, Rémy de Gourmont's *Théodat*, Van Lerberghe's *Les Flaireurs*, Laforgue's *Le Concile féerique*, a translation of Marlowe's *Tragical History of Doctor Faustus* by MM. de Nion and Striensky, amongst others. The poetry recitations encompassed adaptations of *Chansons de Gestes* by Merrill, Hérold and Retté, Pierre Quillard's *La Fille aux mains coupées*, Paul Roinard's paraphrase of the *Song of Songs*, Mallarmé's translation of Poe's *The Raven*, Rimbaud's *Le Bateau ivre*, and much else besides.

Let me describe the performances of *Les Aveugles*, *Le Concile féerique* and the *Cantique des Cantiques*, all staged on the same evening.

Maeterlinck, then residing in his native Ghent, couldn't come to Paris to oversee rehearsals for *Les Aveugles*, and had deputised me to handle the staging. I threw myself into it heart and soul; it took fully thirty rehearsals to bend the actors—the actresses especially—to the delivery of this prose they found so peculiar. The parts were eventually mastered. The lead was taken by M. Lugné-Poé, future founder of the Théâtre de l'Œuvre, who carried it off splendidly. All seemed set to run like clockwork when, virtually at curtain-up, I discovered we'd forgotten an indispensable prop.

The play, as you'll know, revolves around the lamentations of a band of blind folk lost in the depths of a forest. The priest guiding them has sat them down to rest in a clearing. He himself has leant back against a tree trunk and, whilst the blind people talk amongst themselves, has died without warning. Upon waking, they call for him in vain. The most agile rises, gropes about searching, and eventually discovers the corpse. Their terror and despair provide the drama's wrenching climax.

And here we'd forgotten the dummy meant to represent the priest. What on earth to do?

We got hold of some hay to stuff a piece of sacking. We shaped this bundle into something vaguely corpse-like. We shoved it into a cassock borrowed in haste from a costumier, knotted a clerical collar round where the neck should be, and sketched a rudimentary face in charcoal on the pad serving as a head. Since this mannequin sat well upstage, with the house in darkness and the stage bathed in the bluish twilight I'd created by fitting coloured glass over the footlights, the illusion held.

Posted in the wings, I cranked a contraption designed to mimic wind through leaves—a silk-covered cardboard cylinder that rubbed between two leather pads. The effect was remarkably convincing.

All went swimmingly at first, but then a fresh mishap nearly scuppered everything. With Maeterlinck's blessing, I'd made various cuts deemed essential. Keeping the amended script for myself, I'd handed the prompter the pamphlet with the full text, but forgot to mark the passages to skip. When he reached the first cut, he ploughed on regardless with the printed lines. The actors froze in confusion. Mercifully, Lugné-Poé rallied instantly. He picked up the earlier lines, the others caught on, much to the prompter's bewilderment—I could see him from where I stood, leafing frantically through his pamphlet in mounting panic.

At the second cut, same snag. Imperturbable, Lugné-Poé repeated his manoeuvre; the others obediently followed suit. The prompter, now utterly lost, held his tongue for the rest of the performance. Since everyone knew their lines perfectly, there was no chaos. The audience suspected nothing. Indeed, as Maeterlinck at that period rather overdid his verbal repetitions, some praised these triple refrains as a masterstroke of dramatic power, whilst others deplored their tedium.

The impact was tremendous nonetheless. When Lugné-Poé laid his hand on the corpse and cried in a strangled voice: "There is a dead man amongst us!" a tremendous shudder ran through the house, followed by a storm of applause...

For *Le Concile féerique*, which I'd also staged, I decided to prompt personally. Crouched in my box, I was spurring on the actors when a groundswell of noise from the auditorium cut them short. Spectators were heckling, others trying to shush them. The painter Ibels, on his feet in the balcony, announced that these verses set his teeth on edge, whilst the poets Saint-Pol-Roux and Julien Leclerc damned him to perdition. The din intensified. Scores of spectators rose and, turning towards the impassive Sarcey in the stalls, began chanting to the tune of the *Lampions*: "Speech! Speech!"[44]

From my cubbyhole, I couldn't properly gauge the hullabaloo. I questioned Mlle Camée, playing the lead, who brought me up to speed. I was already contemplating leaping onto the stage to thunder a magisterial *Quos Ego*[45] at the crowd when the racket finally died down. The piece concluded without further incident.

As for the *Song of Songs* paraphrase, M. Roinard had conceived the notion of structuring it according to René Ghil's theory of instrumentation from his *Traité du Verbe* and Arthur Rimbaud's sonnet *Voyelles*. Thus Act One featured dominant A's with black décor; Act Two, E's with white décor —and so forth.

Furthermore, M. Roinard insisted that throughout each act, clouds of perfume should waft through the theatre, corresponding to the verbal and visual sensations he hoped to kindle in his audience.

But the theatre's coffers couldn't stretch to such aromatic tempests. We settled for posting two stagehands in the orchestra pit, armed with humble atomisers purloined from Mme Fort's boudoir. Only front-row noses caught any whiff whatsoever. The rest of the house smelt precisely nothing. Great sport was had watching the stagehands' solemn dedication to their spraying duties. Then some wits began sniffing ostentatiously, and the spectacle dissolved into rather farcical chaos.

Here was an intriguing experiment, nonetheless. Sadly, the means fell far short of the ambitions. And M. Roinard's paraphrase itself, whilst perfectly respectable, wanted grandeur.

Still, the Théâtre d'Art productions bore genuine fruit. The press remained hostile, certainly. But those not entirely blinkered by anti-Symbolist prejudice recognised real talent in several of the playwrights. *Les Aveugles*, *Les Flaireurs* and *L'Intruse* achieved genuinely chilling effects. *Les Uns et les Autres*, with Mlle Moreno (still at the Conservatoire) proving absolutely enchanting, delighted audiences like Watteau sketches set to ethereal music. I myself witnessed cultivated ladies weeping openly as Mlle Camée's melodious voice intoned the melancholy stanzas of *La Fille aux mains coupées*.

Any theatre director worth his salt would have spotted in these rough-hewn performances a golden opportunity to champion the Symbolists. They in turn, thus emboldened, would have produced dramas certain to draw respectable houses. But vaudeville held sway under Francisque Sarcey's iron rule, whilst M. Rostand, reared in the Academy's shade, was preparing to crimp and curl the Parnassian alexandrine. Thus came to naught the hope Gustave Kahn had voiced in 1889 in one of his superb chronicles for the second *Vogue*: "Certainly, faced with the whited sepulchres of directorial power that dot Paris like the white marabout tombs marking the Dead Sea's shores, dramas are discussed, gossiped about, turned into poems—since no Lancelot can force open the gates of the Dolorous Gard with his sword-pommel[46]. But mark well, for future reference, this indication I give of coming dramatists. Others exist; our friend Henri de Régnier likewise promises to become a formidable playwright. Thus do our unknown friends conceive of us."

LA CÔTE D'OR

Such was the sign above a small restaurant near the Odéon, which Harold Swan mentions when speaking of the *La Plume* soirées.

The proprietor had granted us use of his first-floor room, where we were waited upon by a fellow who, through constant exposure to poets, had gradually acquired a literary patina and would boast to his colleagues of having penetrated the arcana of Symbolism. Perhaps he even composed verses in secret.

What debates that room witnessed! What brilliant repartee and subtle disputations rang through those walls! The most eloquent by far was poor Frédéric Corbier; besotted with mathematics and philology, he would deluge us with algebraic formulae and quotations in half a dozen languages. When

this erudite fever seized him, we'd quickly beg for mercy, and I would apply, like a well-timed extinguisher, Martial's verse:

Scire tuum nihil est nisi te scire hoc sciat alter…

[Your knowledge is nothing when no one else knows that you know it]

Should he persist, we'd chant in unison a ballad cobbled together one evening round the table, whose refrain ran: "Corbier strikes me as dogmatic."

At this he'd dissolve into laughter and unleash a barrage of outrageous puns... Yet beneath such gaiety lurked a profound melancholy. He never revealed to a soul what grief was consuming him. Then one December night, he flung himself from the Pont d'Arcole into the Seine. The cold was bitter; ice floes choked the river. A month later they found his corpse locked in the frozen mass...

Other evenings we'd recite poetry. Merrill would deliver the most incandescent stanzas from his *Fastes*, whilst I intoned *Une belle Dame passa*. But the undisputed champion amongst us was Jean Moréas. In his sonorous voice he'd declaim poems from *Le Pèlerin passionné*, beating time with an imperious forefinger.

And we'd burst into song, borrowing the Toreador's tune from *Carmen*:

Jean Moréas a publié
Le Pèlerin passionné!
Buvons, amis, oui, oui, buvons avec excès
A sa gloire, à son succès,
Et célébrons, et célébrons
Son immortalité!...

[Jean Moréas has published
The Passionate Pilgrim!
Come drink, friends, yes, yes, drink without measure
To his glory, to his fame,
And celebrate, yes celebrate
His immortality!…]

Indeed, it was at the Côte d'Or that the Roman School came into being. Charles Maurras would occasionally drop by to draft manifestos with Moréas. The disciples—Raymond de la Tailhède (since departed), Maurice du Plessys (departed as well), Ernest Raynaud—absorbed archaic diction through proximity to their Master.

Moréas brooked no dissent. One day, du Plessys, on the verge of publishing his *Premier livre pastoral*, showed him the dedication he planned to place at the volume's head. It listed a dozen names, from Homer through to Ronsard, concluding with Alfred de Vigny.

Moréas heard out du Plessys's literary pantheon in silence. But once his disciple had finished, he twisted his moustache in displeasure, then declared curtly: "You must not admire Vigny."

Taken aback, du Plessys ventured: "But surely he's a poet of considerable talent..."

Moréas cut him short with a peremptory gesture and repeated: "You must not admire Vigny."

Du Plessys submitted and struck out Vigny's name.

Let no one imagine I mock Moréas's doctrinaire spirit. Like all poets of substance, he held firm convictions. Having denounced Romanticism root and branch, he could hardly do otherwise than repudiate the Romantic author of *Eloa*.

Yet despite Moréas's stern discipline and Maurras's zealous advocacy, the Roman School foundered. Only when he cast off the excessive archaism that had regrettably encumbered certain poems in *Le Pèlerin passionné* did Moréas emerge as the consummate poet we now revere. Having abandoned his role as chef d'école, intent solely on nurturing his own lyricism, unencumbered by thoughts of pastiche or pedagogical example, he gave us those magnificent *Stances* and that genuinely, purely classical *Iphigénie*. Thus he returned to the Symbolist fold—for as Remy de Gourmont so aptly observed, "Symbolism is nothing less than the expression of individualism in art."

The Roman brigade, then, has passed into history. But Jean Moréas endures and shall endure...

One morning I invited to the Côte d'Or a certain Frédéric Bataille, master at the Lycée de Vanves and, in his leisure hours, sub-Parnassian versifier. A decent sort, but one who harboured an implacable loathing for Symbolism. His chief complaint was our alleged abuse of neologisms—actually one of the charges most frequently laid at our door. Quite without foundation, for as Félix Fénéon noted regarding Jacques Plowert's *Petit Glossaire* for Decadents and Symbolists (Plowert being Paul Adam's nom de plume), most of our supposedly recherché vocabulary could be found in the humblest pocket dictionary.

Well then, Frédéric Bataille burst out: "But why in heaven's name employ terms that baffle everyone?... Look here, Retté—you've just published an article containing this peculiar phrase: 'Des serpents se lovent.' Now what on earth does 'se lovent' mean?"

Without a word, I dispatched the waiter to fetch a Petit Larousse from beneath the Odéon arcades. Opening it to L, I thrust under Bataille's nose the entry: "*Se lover*: to coil up in a spiral (of snakes and serpents)."

How one wishes we might have dealt thus with all those critics who, perhaps lacking proper command of French, charged us with concocting preposterous vocabulary...

The Côte d'Or exists no more. Recently I passed the building where it once stood. The sign had vanished, shutters barred the shopfront, and the first-floor windows gazed down naked of curtains.

"So," I reflected, "nevermore shall that room—where we were so merry, so assured of our art's destiny—resound with the thunder of Symbolist eloquence... Here's another fragment of my youth receding into memory."

A HOAX

Back then, Max Nordau was combing Paris for material to fill his bizarre book, *Dégénérescence*. Forever invoking his master Lombroso, he discovered symptoms of social decay at every turn and, as Clemenceau so wittily put it, "liberally dispensed certificates of degeneracy to all who failed to share his views."

The Symbolists, predictably, struck Nordau as textbook cases of "circular graphomania." Keen to study us at close quarters, he became a fixture at the Café François I on the Boulevard Saint-Michel, where we would sometimes gather to talk of art and literature. He would plant himself as near our table as possible and, whilst downing prodigious quantities of absinthe, scribble notes on our conversation.

In time we couldn't help but notice this unkempt listener who, ear cocked in our direction, would steal furtive glances our way when not muttering Teutonic oracles into his beard.

One of our party made enquiries; he learnt that Nordau was gathering intelligence to slot us into a chapter of his work-in-progress under the rubric "Neuropathy."

From that moment on, we took pains to furnish him with the most alarming revelations about ourselves. One professed to unnatural desires and rhapsodised about the splendours of same-sex love. Another claimed allegiance to the "artificial paradises" and made a show of swallowing bread pellets he presented as opium or hashish pills. We all, in fact, spouted the most outlandish notions concerning religion, society, and morality.

Nordau was beside himself with glee. He lapped it all up with the most entertaining eagerness. And thus was born the section of *Dégénérescence* devoted to the Symbolists.

Those persons—should any exist—who take this polygraph's scholarship seriously are now enlightened as to the value of his research methods.

Nordau, for his part, harbours a touching regard for his own abilities.

In an article the *Grande Revue* ran last year, he latched onto some inanity about "posterity beginning at the frontier" to proclaim that his Teutonic origins placed him in the perfect position to pronounce final judgement on French literature. Building on this foundation, he proceeded to deliver himself of various opinions concerning Balzac, Verlaine, and Barrès, whose heavy-handed pedantry was equalled only by their presumption.

He had previously taken aim at Verlaine, citing as proof of diseased immorality that exquisite poem from *Amour* entitled "Written in 1875":

J'ai longtemps habité le meilleur des châteaux
Dans le plus fin pays d'eau vive et de coteaux…

[Long did I dwell in the finest of castles
In the most gracious land of clear streams and hillsides…]

Anyone possessed of sound judgement would recognise these verses as the tender, deeply human rendering of a quite simple state of mind, entirely free of morbidity. Verlaine recalls his prison days when, in silence and solitude, he found himself again. He contrasts the tranquillity he knew then with the tempests that have assailed him since his release. And he conveys his feelings with wonderful artlessness.

Where is the abnormality in that?

But Nordau belongs to that species of mediocrity that bristles at any form of excellence. Rather than admit his limitations, he transforms them into virtues and, pandering to the mob of his own kind, denounces as depraved lunatics all those who spread their wings and soar—high above the plodding Nordaus of this world.

Which is why Remy de Gourmont had every reason to write in his preface to *Le Livre des Masques*: "Textbooks provide definitions of Beauty; they go further: they supply the formulae whereby an artist attains the expression of beauty. Institutes exist where such formulae are taught—formulae that represent merely the average and digest of previous ideas. Since aesthetic theories tend to be obscure, they are supplemented with examples, the ideal paragon, the model to be followed. In these institutes (and the civilised world is but one vast Institute), every innovation is deemed blasphemous, every assertion of individuality becomes an act of insanity. Nordau, who has ploughed through the entirety of contemporary literature with peculiar determination, spread this notion—so vilely hostile to all intellectual individualism—that 'non-conformism' constitutes a writer's capital offence. We beg emphatically to differ. The capital offence for a writer is conformism, capitulation to rules and precepts. A writer's work should be not simply the reflection but the amplified reflection of his personality."

Nothing could be better said.

SALOMÉ

It was through our mutual friend Stuart Merrill that I came to know Oscar Wilde. Merrill, like all of us, savoured Wilde's genius as a conversationalist—or should I say monologuist—and the sublime manner in which he held forth on his philosophy of *hedonism*.

One day, Merrill told me: "Wilde wants us both to go through his drama *Salomé*, pen in hand, and root out the more glaring Anglicisms. I disagree entirely—to my mind, it's precisely Wilde's exotic French that lends the piece much of its charm—but he won't be dissuaded."

I was of the same mind as Merrill and said as much to Wilde. Still, he persisted. He brought me the manuscript of *Salomé*, and I remember how, during that visit, he maintained that the role of Salomé should be played by an actress who was equally a dancer of the first order. For over an hour he held forth on this theme, weaving such a spell that I was utterly entranced. Yet I shan't attempt to recapture the impression he made—it would be futile. Not only were his ideas subtle and exquisite, but he had a

gift for setting them off with a beguiling delivery of quite irresistible charm. I marked some corrections in the margins. I persuaded Wilde to strike out an interminable catalogue of precious stones he had placed in Herod's mouth. Merrill, for his part, suggested various amendments. The manuscript then passed to Pierre Louÿs, who likewise altered several phrases. It was this version that went to press.

In truth, *Salomé* is not a particularly fine play. As André Gide observed so aptly in his chapter on Wilde in *Prétextes*: "The best of his writing is merely a pallid echo of his brilliant conversation. Those who heard him speak find it disappointing to read him."

When Oscar Wilde fell prey to Anglican hypocrisy, the journalists—those paragons of austerity and virtue, as we all know—showered him with their venom. Yet I don't believe a single one of his friends forsook him. We all shared the sentiment so perfectly expressed by Henri de Régnier in *Figures et Caractères*: "Mr Wilde thought himself living in Renaissance Italy or in the Greece of Socrates. He was punished for his chronological error—and severely so, considering he was living in London, where such anachronisms are, it seems, quite commonplace.

"In any event, one need not know how he lived there, but only remember meeting in Paris a charming and eloquent gentleman by that name, cherished in the memory of all who love fine words and fine stories."

I last saw Wilde at the Rodin banquet in June 1900. There was something abject and penitent in his bearing that grieved me. He offered his hand diffidently, as though fearing it might be refused. This posture cut me to the quick. I saw that his ordeal had broken him.

I was not mistaken—within months, he was in his grave.

Poor Alcibiades, martyred by clergymen and merchants of cant—if the Elysian Fields hold a grove for those who knew how to *speak* of beauty, you surely wander there.

WHISTLER

As I bring this book to a close, word reaches me of the death of that great painter, James McNeill Whistler. I recall the brilliant raconteur who illuminated Mallarmé's Tuesday gatherings with his crystalline wit. His paintings, too, come back to me. In my mind's eye, I see again the *Nocturnes*, the *Ocean*, the *Harmonies*, the *Snow Effects*, and above all that sublime portrait of his mother which hangs in the Musée du Luxembourg. That masterpiece—where simplicity of means conceals consummate artistry, where line and colour conspire to express an entire life—deserves its place beside the most magnificent achievements of the Old Masters. It will endure as long as humanity cherishes Beauty.

Whistler possessed a profound understanding of his craft. Both witty and penetrating, he spoke of it with such memorable eloquence that his words stayed with you. Several of these aphorisms deserve quotation here—those which M. de Mitty had the foresight to preserve.

What Whistler proclaimed about his art, the Symbolists believe of literature. It's therefore a fitting conclusion for this chapter.

A picture is complete, he would say, when every trace of the means used to create it has disappeared.

To say of a picture, as people often do in praise, that it betrays serious and arduous labour, is to say that it remains unfinished and unfit for viewing.

Industry in art is a necessity, not a virtue; proof not of achievement, but of inadequate effort. For only work can obliterate the evidence of work.

And this magnificent declaration:

The master's work doesn't smell of the sweat of his brow, betrays no strain. It is complete from its inception.

There is he who labours; he who struggles; and he who rushes forward only to fall further behind.

The masterpiece must appear to the painter like the flower—perfect in bud as in full bloom, without reason to justify its existence, without purpose to serve. A delight to the artist, a mystery to the philanthropist, an enigma to the botanist, an accident of sentiment and alliteration to the literary man.

Conclusion

It remains to determine why Symbolism met with such fierce opposition, to examine what it accomplished, and to define the philosophy that became its hallmark once it cast off the hazy spiritualism that shrouded its early days.

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The Symbolists appeared at a moment when genuine criticism—serious, informed, independent—had virtually disappeared from the newspapers. For as we all know, most of these publications, even those affecting literary airs, are run by illiterates. These dealers in newsprint, measuring the public by their own ignorance, concluded it was pointless to dedicate even a few weekly columns to reviewing books whose value they couldn't begin to assess. Meanwhile, the politicians who have colonised every sphere fancy that their blather enthralls readers far more than any thoughtful, reasoned commentary on literary developments. Finally, most newspapers regard poetry and the novel as merchandise to be hawked with the same publicity tactics used for soaps, cough drops, and patent medicines.

"The chemists and distillers pay us to puff their potions," reasoned the hard-headed men who hold the press's purse strings. "Why shouldn't authors do likewise? In any case, we insist on one iron rule: everything we print must yield a return."

Certain writers, heavy with coin but light on artistic integrity, found this logic entirely sensible. They obliged with gusto. And thus, on behalf of mediocre books, we've been treated to thunderous articles placing third-rate novelists above Balzac, and to promotional pieces—as periodic as they are ecstatic—whose shamelessness would make a mountebank blush.

With two or three exceptions—at most—such practices have become the norm at certain mass-circulation papers. Indeed, when some ingenuous staff writer ventures to mention a fine book by a writer of conscience, he's met with: "Has this poet crossed our palm?"

"No, he's poor. And even were he wealthy, he'd baulk at paying for praise."

"Then not a word about him."

Now, the Symbolists cherish too pure a love of Beauty, hold art in too high esteem, to bend to such arrangements. This was their position from the start; this it remains. Hence the press hirelings have satisfied themselves with jeering at them whenever occasion permitted, recycling stale jokes where wilful ignorance vied with bad faith.

Elsewhere, other journalists so despise literature that, even when at liberty to voice an opinion, they find it wittier to dismiss poets as nonentities beneath serious notice. To this breed belongs one M. Harduin of *Le Matin*. M. Harduin recently published a piece expressing bewilderment that the Ministry of Public Instruction had commissioned M. Catulle Mendès to produce, at state expense, a report on poetic evolution since 1860. "Who could possibly care?" he demanded.

M. Harduin must think remarkably little of his readership, given that he's essentially declaring them too dim-witted to appreciate one of the most distinctive manifestations of our national genius.

Leaving aside M. Mendès's report—one may quarrel with its stance but hardly its interest—it's scarcely outrageous to maintain to M. Harduin that a volume of verse carries greater weight in the intellectual history of France these past forty years than all his political and social pirouettes.

Beyond the newspapers, some reviews prove less boorish. The *Revue des deux mondes* does, admittedly, charge M. Doumic with passing judgement, in perfect incompetence, on every new literary endeavour, yet it publishes the splendid verses of Messieurs de Régnier and Charles Guérin. That must absolve it of many a heavy... lightness.

The *Revue de Paris* showed itself rather sympathetic and discerning. And the *Revue*, under M. Jean Finot's intelligent stewardship, throws its pages open to literature. There Messieurs Mauclair and Pellissier have written with acute perception about gifted writers who remain obscure or neglected. I myself have discussed and continue to discuss poetry there as frequently and extensively as I wish—and I doubt the *Revue*'s readers object to the prominence M. Finot accords French letters.

However that may be, what with the venality of some, the obtuseness of others, the hatred certain democratic politicians harbour for any form of elevated thought, and the hostility of those pontificating *Normaliens* who hold forth in elephantine periodicals, the Symbolists have struggled mightily to gain recognition. And still, owing to their reserve—for they shun those concierges' lodges that pass for editorial offices—they find themselves dismissed by shopkeeper minds who measure a work's worth by the size of its print run.

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Another source of our ill favour with the domesticated spirits was our insouciant habit of challenging, even ridiculing, the Arrivistes and Established Names sanctified by Academies and official poets. Here lies one of Symbolism's defining traits: that spirit of irreverence which earned us the charge of immorality—for in democratic times, whoever shows himself unburdened by prejudice strikes the herd as immoral.

Nietzsche captured it perfectly in his *Aurore*, so excellently translated by Henri Albert: "The free man is immoral, since in all things he *seeks* to depend upon himself alone and not upon established custom."

The crowd, particularly today's crowd, schooled by base minds, gravitates naturally towards those who rouse its cruder emotions, whilst eyeing with suspicion the independents who labour to cultivate in them a taste for art loftier than chromolithographs and café-concerts.

Moreover, novelty—anything that breaks with routine—alarms them; and they lend willing ears to those dreary custodians of tradition who assure them that innovators are either childish lunatics or mountebanks.

Yet how could we respect these champions of the "already uttered," the "already witnessed," the "already flogged to death"? Particularly when they never tired of belittling our efforts and slandering them in the name of the most blinkered chauvinism. Because we dared declare our preference for Ibsen over Gandillot and Swinburne over M. Déroulède, we stood accused of renouncing France. Whilst we wished our homeland to absorb—as she has ever done—the essence of foreign masterworks and transfigure them in her own image, we were charged with perverting the national evolution. Messieurs Coppée and Sully-Prudhomme, to cite but two, branded us "cosmopolitan" and "nebulous," whilst the latter Academician discerned in our *vers libre* the harbinger of catastrophe.

In an article titled *La Désespérance du Parnasse*, M. Vielé-Griffin delivered a masterly riposte to these two Jeremiahs. He was particularly entitled to do so, having been born in the United States yet chosen France as his adoptive homeland, and having, like his compatriot Stuart Merrill, brought glory to the French language through splendid works.

I shall cite several passages from this article, which I consider definitive:

"... A recent article by Sully-Prudhomme," writes Vielé-Griffin, "stirred us to pity.

Therein we read:

'Feminine beauty grows ever rarer...

For my part, I confess, however hazardous or paradoxical my predictions may prove, I can discover in them only cause for sorrow. I believe I detect a subtle kinship between this perverse evolution and the menace of amorphous verse*, bereft of rhyme or caesura, emancipated from every rule of art, freed from that noble bondage which distinguishes verse from prose.*

The disfigurement of the human species and the enfeeblement of its loftiest language afflict me as a degradation of the earth, as the effacement of the divine seal upon our planet.'

"We are told this epoch is 'troubled'; we accept this as explanation for the trouble manifesting in too many of our contemporaries' minds. Yet M. Sully-Prudhomme has couched his pessimism in terms beyond strange. The future appals him, industry confounds him, mechanical ingenuity unnerves him. His vision is clouded, darkened, uglified: woman grows hideous before his eyes even as prosody grows human.

"At the very least, this solidarity binding feminine beauty to rhythmic verse—for the morose elder encompasses both in his melancholy, despairing gaze—bears witness, were proof still needed, to the vibrant harmony of our language and consecrates the evolution it illuminates.

"To fixed form we opposed fluid form; to posture, gesture; to stasis, movement; to death, we opposed life. What lovelier vindication of these principles could we offer? Behold the Parnassian prosodist, implacable and pedantic foe of our song, the man whose plodding incomprehension infused every official address with his abject terror of our work; today he rises to blaspheme it anew, and with it —in one breath—the future, science, woman, and beauty itself. Is this mere blindness? He drags down race, language, and nation into decay! What starker evidence of the intellectual mortification that stifles and crushes, what clearer proof that our struggle was towards life and within life itself?…"

Vielé-Griffin was right. How could we possibly respect adversaries who had so little faith in France's vitality that they gave her up for lost merely because a handful of poets, driven by free inspiration, were endeavouring to reinvigorate her literature?

Vielé-Griffin concluded with these lines, which I am delighted to reproduce:

"Nothing is dying—neither Europe, nor the fatherland, nor the masterpieces of our language. Latin culture may well transform itself; this is even historically inevitable: we grow weary of reiterating that evolution is the very essence of life, that ideas and their formulations are in perpetual motion. It may be that the free and harmonious prosody of Greece—that living plant which each poet knew how to graft with a metre tailored to his genius—was transplanted into sterile Rome, which stunted and

shackled it within the narrow confines of her legalistic, prosaic spirit. It may be that this prosody, imported to our shores by the Renaissance and long pruned in the Roman manner by our 'legislators of Parnassus', has at last—generous plant that it is—burst its ancient fetters under the surging pressure of Romantic sap. It may be that today, its primordial freedom recovered, it adorns itself with verdant new foliage whose harmonious song mingles once more, here on French soil, with the Music from which speech itself was born.

"I cannot say, but this hypothesis is surely more beautiful, more consoling, and more plausible than that of the honourable academician whose despair has become virtually a public scandal.

"Can we not concede, after all, that those who have faith in the future are better equipped for tomorrow's labours than those who have despaired of it?

"And now, like our muse, the Young Woman appears to grow ugly in the eyes of old men. What a bitter old age this is. How we preferred old Banville exclaiming in wonder at twilight of his years, glimpsing the future:

...Comme la jeune fille est jeune!

[...How young the maiden is!]

Yes, eternally young, like beauty, love, hope, and the ever-renewed voice of poets!..."

Neither M. Sully-Prudhomme nor his admirers could naturally be expected to welcome an argument that struck home with such force and precision. Consequently, we were branded more than ever as irreverent madmen and reckless revolutionaries.

Had M. Sully-Prudhomme, instructed by the evidence, finally recognised his error, perhaps he would not have designated his Nobel Prize money for publishing the works of unknown poets who—as an express condition—were required to conform to Parnassian prosody. He would instead have stipulated that these funds should serve to publish a young unknown who demonstrated mastery in the employment of *vers libre*.

But the old gentleman being incorrigible, the outcome was this: "We received nothing but drivel," M. Georges Lecomte, who served on the jury appointed by M. Sully-Prudhomme, confided to me.

Could any result be more conclusive?

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How endlessly the Symbolists have been reproached for sequestering themselves in little chapels and turning away, with studied disdain, from the social preoccupations of their age! Admittedly, there were some who, besotted with form alone and inhabiting the realm of legend, steadfastly refused to concern themselves with the joys and sorrows of their contemporaries. This was indeed, one must acknowledge, the prevailing spirit of the school at its inception. But what an evolution has taken place! *Les Entretiens politiques et littéraires* showed the way: sociology received as much attention there as art. Paul Adam published his *Critique des Mœurs* in its pages; Bernard Lazare and Vielé-Griffin contributed

analyses of the various political systems that divide the world. The other reviews followed their lead. Need I recall that Mazel in *L'Ermitage*, Remy de Gourmont in his trenchant *Epilogues* for the *Mercure*, and I myself in *La Plume*, in several of my books, and in numerous socialist newspapers, have never ceased to examine, from our various perspectives, the conflicts that agitate contemporary society?

As for altruism, Pierre Quillard founded the journal *Pro Armenia*, which champions the cause of Armenians persecuted by Turks and Russians alike. Ferdinand Hérold and Louis Dumur established *L'Européen*, an organ of international peace to which many Symbolists contribute. Verhaeren, in his verse, has celebrated labour, the struggle for existence waged by workers and farmers, and ultimately the efforts of our contemporaries to render the planet ever more suited to the needs of the species. He has done so in an abrupt, feverish style graced with magnificent imagery; he has achieved synthetic effects of extraordinary power. Consider, for example, these stanzas extracted from his latest collection, *Les Forces tumultueuses*:

Le monde entier travaille et l'Europe debout,
Là-bas, sur son tas d'or millénaire qui bout,
Du fond de ses banques formidables, préside
A ces trafics captés par des cerveaux lucides,
Chiffre à chiffre, dans les mailles de leurs calculs.
Si les chutes, les débâcles, et les reculs
Brisent parfois les rets des trop vastes audaces,
Il n'importe: les ors croulent et se déplacent
Sans appauvrir les sols ni dessécher les mers;
La fortune toujours tient ses vantaux ouverts
Devant la neuve ardeur et la jeune folie,
Il faut vider le vin avant le flot de lie.
Et qui compte les morts n'est déjà plus vivant.

La terre est désormais, du Ponant au Levant,
A la race qui l'explora jusqu'en ses astres.
Qui traversa tous les dangers, tous les désastres,
Toutes les morts dans l'espoir fou de détenir
Un jour, entre ses mains, vieilles mais obstinées,
Les énigmes, les mystères, les destinées
Dont s'éclairent les yeux mi-clos de l'avenir...

[The whole world labours and Europe stands erect,
There, upon her seething millennial hoard of gold,
From the depths of her formidable banks, presides
Over these trades captured by lucid minds,
Figure by figure, within the mesh of their calculations.
If collapses, disasters, and retreats
Sometimes shatter the nets of too-vast audacities,

No matter: gold tumbles and shifts its place
Without impoverishing the soil or drying the seas;
Fortune forever keeps her gates thrown wide
Before fresh ardour and youthful folly,
The wine must be drained before the tide of dregs.
And whoever counts the dead has already ceased to live.

The earth belongs henceforth, from West to East,
To the race that explored her to her very stars,
That crossed through every danger, every disaster,
Every death in the mad hope of grasping
One day, in hands grown old but obstinate,
The enigmas, mysteries, destinies
That illuminate the half-closed eyes of the future...]

Indeed, many of us throw ourselves into public life. Quillard delivers lectures; Tailhade lashes the bourgeoisie with his scathing articles; Gustave Kahn declaims magnificent poems at civic gatherings. Can these be the deeds of art-for-art's-sake devotees, withering away in frigid isolation, removed from the world?

Yet the young *naturalists*, *humanists* and their ilk, eager to consign us to oblivion, would champion in place of our endeavours something they call didacticism—an art that amounts to nothing more than sermonising, or setting object lessons to verse.

As for those critics who, having created nothing themselves, can only carp at others' creations, they charge us with treating human passion as mere grist for the metaphorical mill. They deserve no consideration. Saint-Simon's words fit them perfectly: "The world is full of people who trim the wick but never replenish the oil, who fancy they enhance their own glory by dimming that of others." Let us have done with them.

The matter of didacticism demands settling once and for all—its artistic bankruptcy must be laid bare. In what follows, I shall attempt to explain why the Symbolists have rejected it, and how they have come to divide their work into two spheres: one in which they discharge, each according to his nature, their duties as citizens; the other in which they celebrate life in all its manifestations.

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For the Symbolists, who embody individualism in art, their criticism and social writings serve as commentary on their creative work, vindication of their aesthetic creed, or arms in defence of their ideals. They relish the combat. Whether on the attack or in defence, they disdain petty manoeuvring, and even when at odds with their peers, they never stoop to diminishment.

When they praise—and praise comes naturally to them—it isn't the stragglers plodding along paths already blazed, but fellow warriors who keep pace with them. And rather than withhold their admiration, they will acknowledge in an adversary virtues that mirror their own.

They cannot bend to any discipline or accept constraints that would curb their vital force. Should they try, their individuality breaks free and sweeps them along. Nor do they lack illustrious precedents. Let me invoke one from the past: Taine.

Taine embraced the determinist hypothesis with passion, seeking to transform it into certainty. But how vainly he struggles to restrict himself to the patient, painstaking exposition of the conditions that shape and nurture a work of art! How vainly he marshals a thousand laboriously gathered facts to his system, striving to assess with perfect equanimity the most disparate temperaments! Inevitably the moment comes when his ardour for life's exuberant force, burning within him, blazes forth. Then, in taut phrases trembling with admiration, he crowns his champions. He conjures up, say, the splendour of Rubens and the Venetian masters, and by comparison reduces Fra Angelico's delicate visions to dust. Or, having dissected the age of warfare, revelry and violent passion that gave birth to Shakespeare, he bursts out: "The sixteenth century is a den of lions!"

Make no mistake—this exclamation carries no reproach. Taine cherished life too deeply in its most vigorous forms to mar his vision of the sixteenth century by cloaking it in philanthropic pieties. He understood that Shakespeare thought and dreamed beyond good and evil. And surely he must have chuckled to himself reading those prefaces where the worthy François-Victor Hugo—a first-rate translator, to be fair—detects moral instruction in the English poet's dramas.

For Taine, like all who regard art as the blossoming of those passions, desires and dreams through which an age declares its vision of beauty, never believed a work required moral instruction to achieve perfection. It sufficed that it render with force a state of mind, a glimpse of human behaviour, or simply an arrangement of harmonious forms.

From this standpoint, he could praise with equal fervour Macbeth murdering his benefactor and Cordelia comforting her father in adversity after he had spurned her. In studying La Fontaine, he sided with neither wolf nor lamb. He simply noted how brilliantly the fabulist had embodied in these creatures the savage truculence of the predator and the cowering submission of the doomed weakling. And philosophising on Rubens, he found equal cause for admiration in *La Kermesse* and *La Descente de croix*.

Such comprehension of art remains, alas, exceedingly rare. In our own day particularly, the tendency runs towards making aesthetics a subsidiary of ethics. Worse yet: we witness people everywhere allowing their political prejudices to dictate their judgements on writers.

Thus it was that a man of decidedly measured temperament, though inflamed by a cause célèbre, insisted to me that M. Anatole France had forfeited his talent the day he made his Bergeret a Dreyfusard and a socialist.

In the same vein, I once heard an ardent neo-Kantian strip M. Barrès of all merit for having written *Les Déracinés*. When I drew his attention to certain splendid chapters in that work, he positively erupted with rage and very nearly branded me a... nationalist.

Yet the Symbolists, whatever their political and social convictions, refuse to let these intrude when they examine a work of art. They relish it if it reveals an author of distinctive personality, and they explain the grounds for their admiration. Should they, when weighing two writers, favour one above the other, it is because *his temperament* proves more congenial. This granted, they acknowledge his right to sing the praises of despotism or anarchy, debauchery or chastity, Baruch Spinoza or Ignatius of Loyola—as the spirit moves him.

We must insist upon this principle: a work derives its worth from its originality—not from pandering to party or sect. Hence my determination to protest whenever anyone seeks to demote literature to the status of doctrine's handmaiden, however virtuous that doctrine might be—as virtuous as Calvin's breeches or the Pope's slipper. Neither should we desire art to whine through endless edifying parables for the instruction of all nations, as Tolstoy would have it in his lamentable book: *What is Art?*

To be sure, no one admires more than I the Tolstoy of *The Cossacks*, *War and Peace* and *Resurrection*. However much he mortifies himself, the literary artist he wishes to renounce refuses to be extinguished. Even in that final volume, his anxiety to advance a thesis has not diminished his perennial gift for breathing life into his characters. Nekhlyudov and Maslova *live and breathe*. As a poet, I require nothing more. That others should afterwards conclude that Nekhlyudov's example ought to be emulated by every nobleman who has seduced a young peasant girl—that is their business. For my part, I applaud the artistry with which Tolstoy reveals Nekhlyudov's active will, for precisely the same reasons that lead me to admire the savage determination of Lovelace pursuing his end: the violation of Clarissa, without remorse, without reparation.

Where I draw the line is when Tolstoy, in his *What is Art?*, insists that all literature not drawing inspiration from that wearisome rhapsody known as the Gospel must be pernicious.

What an extraordinary way to circumscribe the writer's province! Yet Tolstoy goes further still: he denounces—with a vehemence that betrays only his ignorance—Wagner's music, the poetry of Baudelaire and Verlaine, and—most unexpected bedfellow—the paintings of M. Gérôme.

In their stead, he commends as approaching his ideal: Millet's *Angelus*, Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables* and *Les Pauvres Gens*, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *Memoirs from the House of the Dead*, a Bach prelude and a Chopin nocturne. Nothing more!

Whether these diverse works are calculated to inspire evangelical devotion in contrite souls, I cannot say.

But I venture to suggest that connoisseurs are virtually unanimous in ranking *The Angelus* amongst Millet's weakest efforts.

Tolstoy may protest: "This peasant and his wife offering prayers after their day's toil are deeply edifying." To which they will retort: "Possibly—but they are neither drawn nor painted in Millet's finest manner. We much prefer *Le Printemps* in the Louvre, hanging not far from the third-rate canvas you extol."

Should Tolstoy trouble himself to view *Le Printemps*, he will find merely an April storm's aftermath, rendered, true enough, with consummate skill, yet innocent of any Christian purpose. No

doubt he will cling to his preference for *The Angelus*, invoking some verse from Saint Mark or Saint Matthew.

Likewise, among admirers of *La Légende des Siècles*, there's no shortage of those far more deeply stirred by *Le Satyre* than by *Les Pauvres Gens*. Tolstoy would tell them: "Observe how the struggling fisherman who takes in those wretched orphans, with his wife's consent, follows the teachings of Christ."

To which they'd retort: "Most touching indeed. Yet surely Hugo achieved something far more masterly in that transfiguration of pantheism called *Le Satyre*."

Little point in pursuing the comparison further.

Now, what I hold against Tolstoy isn't simply the moralising obsession that drives him to condemn virtually the entire artistic legacy of the nineteenth century, allegedly because it fails to conform to the Galilean's reveries. Nor is it even his yearning for a literature steeped in Christianity. He's being entirely true to his nature—just as when he advocates, in *Appeal to the Working Classes*, responding to violence with passive resistance, or when he champions, in *On Sexual Morality*, absolute chastity as a state superior to marriage. At such times, he strikes me as a remarkable atavistic phenomenon, and his pamphlets affect me rather as certain treatises of Tertullian do: *De Jejuno* or *De Virginis velandis*, for example. The Slavic apostle and the Montanist bishop appear to me as kindred souls. Yet since both possess formidable talent, they earn their place of honour on my shelves.

What I truly fault Tolstoy for is muddling two entirely distinct matters: morality and literature. Morality is one thing; literature, quite another. Force them into wedlock, and they're liable to spawn monstrosities.

Not that Tolstoy himself falls into this trap—for despite it all, he remains, I insist, an artist rendered admirable by the very extremity of his parti pris. He incarnates altruism today in all its implications, pushed to the point of absurdity, just as Nietzsche incarnates rampant individualism.

By all means let Tolstoy's disciples worship him and wail like infants deprived of their bottles the instant anyone lays a finger on their idol—perfectly fitting; they're playing their appointed role. But one would be gravely mistaken to imagine that Tolstoy's ascetic—and therefore negative—doctrine could possibly serve to establish a new society. The smart money says humanity will continue volleying between altruism and egoism like a shuttlecock batted between racquets wielded by two waggish Demiurges whose deeper game eludes us. Such, in essence, is the Symbolist vision.

For them, art is a garden crowning a summit drenched in azure and radiance. Flowers unfold their vivid or dusky hues, pour forth their heady or subtle fragrances. Trees, stately or delicate, spread their verdant locks where birds of every colour make their nests. Great draughts of air, sweeping from crest to crest, sing through the leaves.

The chimera, robed in dawn or dusk, appears shimmering at the turn of the paths. Statues—fresh-hewn marbles or time-worn bronzes—inhabit the groves: sage Minerva; Venus with her perilously tender gaze; and further on, mighty Isis beneath her star-strewn veil.

At the mountain's base, along its flanks, humanity labours, weeps, laughs and battles. From its sweat, its tears, its joys and its blood comes the loam that feeds the garden.

All the while the poet, that diligent gardener, moves from bed to bed, rooting out the weeds, festooning the statues with violets and roses, with laurel and cypress. Then he gathers his bouquets and carries them down to his brothers toiling in the valley, that they might transfigure with vibrant illusion this hazy dream we call Reality.

Afterwards he returns to the heights. Like a philosophical Candide, he tends the plot bordered with particoloured tulips that fate has allotted him. And he strives to cultivate helianthuses whose hues and forms might mirror that magnificent bloom of purple and gold that burns, for him, in the inaccessible vault of heaven—which is decidedly more than a figure of speech.

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This aesthetic, which weighs moral values solely by their intensity, finds support in a philosophy at once unitary and pantheistic, whose intellectual import Paul Adam brilliantly set forth in the magnificent *Discours sur l'émotion de pensée* that prefaced his novel *Le Mystère des foules*.

Here are the essential passages, which splendidly encapsulate the Symbolist doctrine.

"Emotions exist beyond mere joy and sorrow. When we contemplate Leonardo's Saint John the Baptist, with that irony playing about his Pan-like features, we feel neither precise pleasure nor distinct pain. The whole composition—the lines, the colours, the gesture's sweep that the artist fixed upon the canvas—delights our sense of beauty: it grants the soul a moment of exquisite repose. Yet the mischief lurking in the androgyne's smile, the mystery of mockery that animates his entire countenance, stirs in us a mental unease. The figure appears to mock our human faith with reasons that are divine, unknowable, yet somehow certain. I have never taken leave of this presence without feeling more reconciled to death's sweetness, more curious about what might lie beyond. Yet one cannot say that such uncertainty about action's ultimate ends brings suffering. Or if it does, what rare pleasure to recognise it within oneself, to probe it, to feed its flames or temper them with that inward smile and resignation through which we win our freedom.

Such is the aesthetic emotion.

Suffering and pleasure—or rather, unease and tranquillity—merge in a single harmonious instant that leaves us trembling. What intoxicates us with satisfaction is witnessing this equilibrium struck between the negative force (suffering) and the affirmative force (joy). Through his work's supreme achievement, the artist has touched that essence of higher consciousness that dwells beyond affirmation and negation: 'pure phenomenon'.

In this figure, where life's joyful and tragic masks converge, we have found the emblem of our philosophy.—Thus much for the realm of ideas.

As for our feelings and sensations before nature, their genesis mirrors what Taine once sketched in the closing pages of his *Voyage en Italie*. None among us could better articulate our pantheism. I quote: 'Before the waters, the sky, the mountains, one stands before beings perfect and perennially young. Chance cannot touch them; they remain as they were on creation's first morning; the same spring will lavish upon them, year upon year, the same abundant life-force; our weakness dissolves at

contact with their strength, and our restlessness quiets beneath their peace. Through them shines the uniform power that unfolds through all the variety and transformation of things—the great mother, fecund and serene, whom nothing can disturb because beyond her there is nothing.

'Then a sensation surfaces in the soul, unknown and profound. The soul's very ground reveals itself; the countless layers life has crusted upon it, the debris of passions and hopes, all the human sediment caked upon its surface loosens and falls away; it recovers its simplicity, rediscovers the instinct of primeval days, those half-formed utterances that once linked it with the natural deities dwelling in things. It grasps that all the words it has since spoken or heard amount to elaborate prattle, mental frenzy, street-corner din—and that if any moment in its existence proves sound and worthy, it is this: when, abandoning the harassments of the human ant-heap, it apprehends what the ancient sages called the music of the spheres—which is to say, the pulse of the eternal universe.'

This communion with nature found voice in de Régnier's magnificent poem from his *Cité des Eaux*, entitled *La Course*. Here is its most revealing passage:

Il me semble que l'ombre informe, peu à peu,
Tressaille, tremble, vibre et s'anime et se meut
Et sourdement s'agite en son silence obscur;
J'entends craquer la poutre et se fendre le mur
Et voici, par sa fente invisible et soudaine,
Que, sournoise d'abord et perceptible à peine,
Une odeur de forêt, d'eau vive et d'herbe chaude
Pénètre, se répand, rampe, circule, rôde
Et, plus forte, plus ample et plus universelle,
S'accroît, se multiplie et m'apporte avec elle
Les diverses senteurs que la terre sacrée,
Forestière, rustique, aride ou labourée,
Mêle au vent de la nuit, du soir ou de l'aurore;
Et bientôt, peu à peu toute l'ombre est sonore,
Elle bourdonne ainsi qu'une ruche éveillée
Qui murmure au soleil, à travers la feuillée,
Après la pluie oblique et l'averse pesante;
Voici que maintenant toute l'ombre est vivante
Et que la nuit bourgeonne et la ténèbre pousse.
Le siège où je m'appuie est tout velu de mousse.
Je me penche : de l'herbe a verdi sur le marbre;
La colonne soudain végète, et c'est un arbre
Qui jusqu'à moi étend sa branche. Je me sens
Environné partout de souffles frémissants
Qui me chauffent la nuque et me brûlent la joue.
L'ombre hennit, l'ombre danse, l'ombre s'ébroue,
Palpite, naît, fleurit, germe, frémit, éclôt.
Je n'ai pas peur. Le vent chante dans les roseaux.
Je sens sourdre à mes pieds des sources; je respire
La résine, le fruit, la vendange, la cire

Et je devine au fond de l'ombre et parmi elle
Comme un cercle incertain de faces fraternelles…

[The formless shadow seems to quicken by degrees,
Shuddering, trembling, thrumming into life,
Stirring mutely in its obscure silence;
I hear the beams creak, the walls crack open,
And through this sudden, invisible fissure
Something steals in—furtive, barely there at first—
A forest scent of running water, sun-warmed grass
That penetrates, spreads, creeps and circles, prowls,
Then stronger, ampler, more universal,
Swells and multiplies, bringing in its wake
Those varied fragrances the sacred earth—
Whether wooded, rustic, barren, tilled—
Blends with the winds of night, of dusk, of dawn;
And soon the shadow fills with sound throughout,
Humming like a hive awakened,
Murmuring through leaves in sunlight
After slanting rain and heavy showers;
Now the whole shadow lives and breathes,
Night burgeons forth, the darkness sprouts.
The seat beneath me grows thick with moss.
I lean forward: grass has greened the marble;
The column suddenly vegetates—becomes a tree
Reaching its branches out to me. I feel
Enveloped everywhere by trembling breaths
That warm my neck and burn my cheek.
The shadow whinnies, dances, shakes itself awake,
Throbs, births, blossoms, germinates, quivers, blooms.
I am not afraid. Wind sings through the reeds.
I feel springs welling at my feet; I breathe
Resin, fruit, the harvest, wax,
And sense within the shadow's depths
An uncertain circle of fraternal faces...]

I have endeavoured to articulate our pantheism in several of my poems as well, particularly in *Le Vagabond*, where I've depicted the struggle between Nature and Anti-Nature, between Pan and Christ. I've given voice to its ecstasies in *Lumières tranquilles* and especially in these verses, which I beg leave to quote:

NOCTURNAL PEACE

To many Fellow Poets

Frères, il est des nuits d'extase et d'innocence
Où, telle une rivière aux ondes de silence,
L'ombre astrale descend du ciel
Pour nous favoriser d'un rêve essentiel.

Oubliant le passé mauvais qui nous blessa,
Nous écoutons d'un cœur nouveau
Les palpitations paisibles des bouleaux
Et notre âme fleurit comme un magnolia.

Notre âme, elle est aussi la colombe blottie
Dans le feuillage frais d'une jeune yeuse,
Notre âme, elle est encore la prairie
Où dort, sous un manteau de lune mi-voilée,
De brouillard pâle et de rosée,
Le peuple gracieux des scabieuses.

Le rythme de la brise est celui d'un beau vers.
Sous les saules pleureurs un ruisseau s'empresse.
L'ombre d'or et d'argent nous frôle et nous caresse
Et nous sentons en nous germer des univers.

[Brothers, there are nights of ecstasy and innocence
When, like a river flowing with waves of silence,
The astral shadow descends from heaven
To favour us with an essential dream.

Forgetting the wounding past that scarred us,
We listen with hearts made new
To the peaceful trembling of the birches,
And our soul blossoms like magnolia.

Our soul—it is the dove nestled
In the fresh foliage of a young holm oak;
Our soul—it is the meadow too
Where sleeps, beneath a cloak of half-veiled moon,
Of pallid mist and dew,
The graceful tribe of scabious.

The breeze's rhythm echoes a beautiful verse.
Beneath the weeping willows a brook hastens by.

Shadow of gold and silver brushes and caresses us,
And we feel whole universes germinating within.]

One will find countless other examples of our vision of the universe—admirable ones—in the verses of Kahn, Vielé-Griffin, Verhaeren, Merrill, and in Maeterlinck's *La Vie des Abeilles.* At last, the sage's pronouncement has been made by Jean Moréas in these magnificent verses from the *Stances*:

Ne dites pas: la vie est un joyeux festin,
Ou c'est d'un esprit sot ou c'est d'une âme basse;
Surtout ne dites point: elle est malheur sans fin,
C'est d'un mauvais courage et qui trop tôt se lasse.

Riez comme au printemps s'agitent les rameaux,
Pleurez comme la bise ou le flot sur la grève.
Goûtez tous les plaisirs et souffrez tous les maux
Et dites: c'est beaucoup, et c'est l'ombre d'un rêve.

[Say not: life is a joyous feast—
That speaks of foolish wit or base soul;
Above all, say not: it is endless woe—
That shows poor courage, too quickly spent.

Laugh as branches dance in spring,
Weep like the north wind or waves upon the strand.
Taste every pleasure, suffer every pain,
And say: this is much—and the shadow of a dream.]

Such are the philosophy and the work of Symbolism. They will hardly win us renown amongst the devotees of narrow realism or swashbuckling verse. Yet when the day of justice dawns, they shall perhaps bring us glory. For as Balzac declared, in a phrase both melancholy and magnificent: "Glory is the sun of the Dead!"

THE END

Appendices

I

I thought it worth reproducing here a passage from an article I once published in the *Revue*, in which I set out my views on Mallarmé—views I had already expressed in various periodicals.

...Mallarmé was the great mistake of Symbolism. Here was a man who won celebrity for *failing* to write the masterwork he'd trumpeted for a decade—the work meant to capture, once and for all, the essence of both human and universal soul. He frittered away his existence republishing ten sonnets, half a dozen somewhat longer verses, fifteen prose poems, a single tragic scene, and a handful of theoretical fragments. By his own admission—and though two or three of the more lucid pieces had genuine merit—these were mere études, provisional sketches for an edifice perpetually deferred, whose grand design and import he would expound at length, yet which he could not, or would not, ever construct.

His impotence stemmed from this: Mallarmé proclaimed himself "unfit for anything but the absolute." Yet the absolute cannot be realised. One may contemplate it, as ascetics do, but to pursue the delusion of rendering tangible what transcends the senses is to court inevitable barrenness. Mallarmé held forth endlessly about his project; he amassed vast nebulae which he presented, in all sincerity, to his disciples as the essential building blocks of his œuvre, until at last he died, drunk on illusions, without having penned a single line of it. He had fundamentally mistaken the poet's calling, which is to render, through vivid imagery, personal joys and griefs so powerfully that they become a mirror for all our shared joys and griefs. He had forgotten, too, Goethe's splendid dictum: "The world is so grand, so rich, so diverse that subjects for poetry can never run dry. But all poems must spring from occasion—reality must furnish both the prompt and the substance. A particular subject acquires universality and poetic character precisely through the poet's treatment. All my poems are occasional poems; real life engenders them, and in real life they find their ground and sustenance. As for castles in the air, I hold them worthless."

Here speaks consummate good sense, affirming in full force one of art's iron laws. By flouting it, Mallarmé became the exemplar of spectacular artistic miscarriage. He did try, admittedly, to serve up portions of the Absolute to those acolytes whose palates his disquisitions had prepared for such ethereal nourishment. To this end, he tortured the French language until only disjointed fragments survived. Then, proceeding from the eccentric axiom that "naming an object destroys three-quarters of a poem's pleasure, which lies in the delight of gradual discovery," he bound himself to treat only through hints and indirection those verses and prose pieces he submitted to his readers' powers of divination. Direct communication struck him as puerile. He insisted on conveying his meaning only through the most oblique suggestion possible. His doctrine thus boils down to this: when you wish to communicate something, the pinnacle of refinement is to speak in riddles. Behold the humble charade elevated—nay, glorified—as a supreme literary form! And words—those humble words that countless poets, bogged down in the Relative "for not having known the region where one should live," had trusted to convey their sensations, emotions and thoughts—these Mallarmé denounced as unequal to his conceptions. He so despised them that he preferred to any text, "however sublime," blank pages punctuated by "a pattern of commas and full stops." Yet simultaneously he assigned them an unprecedented role: "From multiple vocables," he declared, "one must forge a total word, pristine, alien to the language and as if incantatory... startling us with the novelty of hearing such an ordinary fragment of speech whilst the echo of the thing named shimmers in an atmosphere made new..."

Mallarmé thus set himself the task of inventing a private idiom to articulate thoughts so rarefied that one practically needed to inhabit an alternate universe to hazard a guess at their eternally symbolic import. He sacrificed everything to this quixotic enterprise, squandered prodigious gifts upon it, spent himself utterly without producing even a rough draft of his vision—and most crucially, without igniting one of those revolutions that remake the literary landscape.

II

The article that follows serves as both a lyrical commentary on and a pantheistic elaboration of free verse theory.

When it appeared in the *Mercure de France*, it created quite a stir—hence our decision to reproduce it here. It stands, moreover, as a companion piece to my preface on free verse in *l'Archipel en fleurs*.

ON THE RHYTHM OF VERSE

I have always felt a certain dread in the presence of those austere souls who appoint themselves the architects of poetic doctrine. The weight they accord to the finer points of 'technique', the laws they promulgate, the anathemas they hurl, the scrupulous care with which they count out the syllables of any poem they condescend to critique, the priestly airs they assume—such erudition and gravity leave me utterly bewildered. In their company, I feel distinctly ill at ease; I strain to pontificate as they do; I bow low when they chant their incantations: Caesura, Enjambment, Strong Beat, Weak Beat, Tonic Accent, Hemistich. I half-expect these terms to be wrathful deities whose shrines I have somehow slighted. I fancy myself a peasant clod whose heavy sabots clatter most unmusically across temple stones. And for days afterwards, I treat as noxious weeds those impudent flowers of lyricism that insist on blooming in my mind...

Yet before long, my baser nature reasserts itself. I laugh in the pontiffs' faces, turn their 'Treatises on Versification' and their 'Learn to Rhyme in Twenty-Five Lessons' into curl-papers. And I deliver a few smart raps to the bust of Boileau I acquired expressly for this purpose. For Boileau—that Louis XIV of the Petdeloups—I hold him, in my moments of impiety, to be the vilest of all those criminals against poetry who weed, prune, clip and regiment the garden of rhythms. To begin with, he had no love for King Childebrand, a man of genuine worth. Then, in his roll of honour emblazoned with a scraggly, wingless Pegasus, he carefully omitted La Fontaine, whose independent genius offended his taste for tempered mediocrity, whose free verse, so sumptuous and lustrous, stood in stark relief against the drab greyness of those wilted turnips: the alexandrines of his *Epîtres* and *Satires*. Lastly, I charge Boileau with prompting those inanities that blemish, here and there, the works of the magnificent Racine. And let no one protest that it's futile nowadays to denounce this moth-eaten Despréaux. Let no one claim his authority has expired. In France: Every man harbours a dormant Boileau in his breast.

Scores of greybeards, scores of youngsters too, stand ready to wake him, to wrap themselves in his leathery skin and harry—armed with pruning-hook and shears—those poets audacious enough to plant the shoots of the tree of life far from any trellis, those who favour, over the laborious nectarines shrivelling against a dismal whitewashed wall at the end of branches like fishbones, the sharp little peaches that ripen freely in the wind... The ranks of the Boileau-afflicted are swelling, I tell you. There's the black brigade of Brunetière's disciples, with their standard-bearer: Doumic of the clammy palms. There are... why, there may even be some who dream of codifying free verse itself. To exterminate these monstrosities, we ought—if only we could unite—to demolish the Sorbonne and force the rubble down their throats.

I've compared Boileau's heirs to insipid gardeners. I might just as well have compared them to those cooks who, steeped in tradition, dare not venture an original sauce for fear of transgressing the precepts laid down by the Berchoux, the Baron Brices, the Brillat-Savarins and other high priests of gastronomy. Or if by chance they do hazard to draw from that treasury of unpolished gems—the cookery of the common people—they do so with the grimaces of grand lackeys lowering themselves. The dishes they appropriate only to adulterate "according to principle" lose all their rustic savour, leaving those unfortunates condemned by propriety to partake of them with nothing but a tepid sensation, powerless to awaken their dormant palates. Rather like Shakespeare adapted by Monsieur Haraucourt...

Last month I found myself in Marseille, where I was served, in a celebrated restaurant, a bouillabaisse—domesticated. Flaccid fish, flavourless lobster, sodden croutons floating in tepid, tawny water scarcely tinged with saffron and peppered by a hand of studied parsimony. Yet some days later, a fisherman took me out in his boat and, when the catch was in, regaled me with genuine bouillabaisse. We had dropped anchor in one of those calanques where soaring rocks frame the profound azure of the radiant sea. The sun at its zenith blazed in glory. A delicate mauve haze veiled the white islands in mystery—those Nereids bounding the horizon. And the waves came to expire, singing, at our feet. Over a fire of vine prunings set between two stones, the divine soup bubbled in a small, blackened pot whose lid rattled away, jolted by bursts of fragrant steam. The fisherman had never studied under Carême; yet the force of his native genius, buttressed by long experience, inspired a bouillabaisse whose memory still quickens my palate. First, what magnificent golden radiance! The saffron had not been spared, nor the pepper, nor the fennel, nor sundry ingredients now forgotten. And the flesh of the fish —amongst them one they call *sirène royale*!—had preserved its full savour. This soup, in short, where so many diverse essences melded into perfect concord, I can compare only to a symphony brilliantly performed[17].

What bearing, you may wonder, have peaches, nectarines, bouillabaisse, versifiers of poetic handbooks, and the rhythm of verse upon one another? Simply this: just as tree-ripened peaches and bouillabaisse wrought by a simple man *must* prevail, in any true poet's mind, over cultivated nectarines and the insipid science of licensed Master Sauciers, so must one heed—if one would discover one's own rhythm—the susurration of leaves, the plash of water and the sibilance of wind, rather than the pedantic mutterings of those who cobble together "Principles of Aesthetics."

Granted, one must have studied, in solitude, the resources of one's craft; certainly it profits one to have indulged, in youth, in those harmless diversions: Parnassian sonnets. But once the tool sits firmly in the hand, once one has become one's own most exacting critic, it behoves one to abandon

such preparatory exercises and surrender wholly to harmonising the movements of one's soul with the movements of the sensible universe.

You whom destiny—perhaps in jest—has marked to engender poems, you whom Forms, Sounds and Essences hold rapt whilst all about your reverie (more real than any reality) practical folk clamour and scurry, remember how there wells up from your innermost being the urge to render, in cadenced strophes, those marvels which earth, ocean, and sky—whether clouded, sun-drenched or star-crowned—ceaselessly bestow upon you.

You were walking, half lost in thought, lending only fitful attention to the incidents of your path. Suddenly a sunbeam sets a brook's wavelets ashimmer. Suddenly the blue shadow of an ancient wall, its mossy crest festooned with wallflowers, inscribes fantastic patterns on the ground. Suddenly the wind plays, chuckling softly, amongst the trembling leaves of a birch. You halt, amazed and delighted. These things, though utterly familiar, strike you *as if glimpsed for the first time*. You contemplate them; your eyes steep themselves in the vision, and when you resume your way, their image—magnified, aureoled, resplendent—floods your mind. Instinctively you forge a link between this image and your soul's temper at the moment of surprise. If melancholy possesses you, it mirrors your melancholy; if joy, it echoes your joy. Presently, an indistinct music stirs within you. A rhythm emerges, grows insistent; unconsciously you attune your stride to its measure. The rhythm sharpens; words surge forward clamouring for admission. Then a hundred subsidiary images rocket up from your Unconscious, striving to wed themselves to the original vision. Here your discernment comes into play: you admit only those words that will convey your emotion with greatest force. You welcome only images bearing manifest kinship with one another. All gradually assumes its proper order; experience furnishes the needed rhymes or assonances. One, two, three—six lines leap forth: enough! The poem's genesis is complete. You may lodge this first sketch in memory's keeping, to retrieve at leisure, to polish and amplify, to enrich with a spectrum of feeling or elevate to symbol, until it comes to embody an idea or aspect of the universe.

Yet whether you choose one path or the other, never forget that your verses must—if you fulfil your poet's calling as nature intended—spontaneously kindle in whoever responds to rhythmic beauty emotions equivalent to those that gripped you in creation. Equivalent, I say, not identical—for no man can presume to convey in full the ideas, feelings and sensations of another. Still, if you were true, if your poem, in its broad humanity, compels through simplicity, you may enjoy the happy fortune of your reader discovering virtues you never suspected. Then shall you rejoice as one. You'll be like children who, having climbed a cherry tree thinking they'd plundered it bare, suddenly spy a branch still heavy with fruit. The dense foliage had concealed it; but a timely breeze reveals the bounty. They point it out to one another; they raise a triumphant song; then, in brotherhood, they share the succulent cherries.

I might have resorted to pedantic jargon to explain how lyrical emotion takes root and flowers in the poet's soul. It would be simple enough to construct a *Physiology of Inspiration*. But what aridity, what tedium! How much better, I felt, to use only common words. After all, they suit the analysis of a phenomenon that is, in essence, perfectly ordinary. For every man, whatever his turn of mind, falls at some point under the spell of the dream I've just described. Only in most people the impression soon fades, whilst in the poet it endures, intensifies, and verges on hallucination. This is because the poet, a *specialised* creature, follows his instinct. Inclined to seize upon every rhythm nature offers to feed his

harmony-starved imagination, he neglects, disdains, or bungles those social duties that bear no relation to his fundamental calling. Hence a thousand blunders of which he remains blissfully unaware. Hence a thousand torments that leave him flayed alive—yet these same torments sharpen his sensibility. And then, what sublime compensations! For his unappeasable hunger for beauty drives him ceaselessly towards fresh conquests; before the world, he remains his whole life long like Adam on Eden's first morning.

I speak, naturally, of the sound poet—one who endeavours to convey *primal* emotions honestly, without cosmetics or distortion, under pretence of mystery, perversity, or "novel frissons". Those who favour over a fine tree's contemplation or a rose's perfume the smell of "new mown hay" or the spectacle of some skeletal ballerina writhing and grimacing amongst falsely-tinted stars beneath the dead glare of electric lights—these will not understand me.

Nor will those lacquered versifiers who treat their poems as stepping-stones to official buffoonery, who know that splendid sight—a potato field in flower—only through hearsay. These lustrous personages, whether they dedicate themselves to hymning Our Emil or the pug nose of Nicholas of the Kalmyks: let them reap the laurels fit to festoon their cone-shaped craniums. For my part, I prefer to know nothing of them.

Little by little, the habit of casting emotions into lyrical rhythm becomes so tyrannical in the poet that often, in conversation or when he condescends to prose, his sentences preserve the gait of verse. Indeed, they sometimes fall into stanzas, with or without rhyme. Father Hugo was notorious for this, and countless examples have been cited of this obsession—quite natural, given his daily poetic production. Here's one, furnished by the Marquis de Rochefort in the second volume of his *Aventures de ma vie*: "One evening at dinner, we were discussing French finances, and Hugo said to me without interrupting his meal:

Certes, et, quoique mort, Fould est encor vivant
Dans tout ce qu'on achète et dans tout ce qu'on vend,
Compris la conscience, et dans les phénomènes
De l'enregistrement, du timbre et des domaines.

[Certainly, and though dead, Fould lives on still
In all that's bought and all that's sold,
Conscience included, and in the phenomena
Of registration, revenue stamps, and state domains.]

Then he carried on the conversation in prose, quite unconscious of this versified aside."

I find another instance, perhaps less familiar, in Molière's *L'Amour-Peintre*. In Scene II of Act One, Hali opens his soliloquy thus: "Il fait noir comme dans un four. Le ciel s'est habillé, ce soir, en Scaramouche et je ne vois pas une étoile qui montre le bout de son nez. Sotte condition que celle d'un esclave, de ne vivre jamais pour soi et d'être toujours tout aux passions d'un maître."

These are verses—delightful verses at that; let me demonstrate:

Il fait noir comme dans un four.
Le ciel s'est habillé, ce soir, en Scaramouche
Et je ne vois pas une étoile
Qui montre le bout de son nez.
Sotte condition que celle d'un esclave,
De ne vivre jamais pour soi
Et d'être toujours tout aux passions d'un maître.

[Black as an oven out here.
The sky has dressed tonight as Scaramouche
And not a single star
Shows the tip of its nose.
Wretched lot of a slave,
Never to live for oneself
But always wholly at a master's passions' call.]

Three alexandrines and four octosyllables! Almost certainly Molière didn't *intend* this stanza. Rhythmic habit doubtless made him write it so. Perhaps he'd first planned to versify *L'Amour-Peintre*. But pressed for time or for some other reason—an order from old Scarron's second husband?—he had to settle for prose. In which case, the poetic machinery, being first engaged, presumably set itself going of its own accord and produced the stanza.

Such examples could be multiplied. I know of them in de Vigny, in others besides. Moreover, any poet who pays attention to himself can confirm that he routinely thinks in verse without requiring the momentum of spoken or written rhythm. Speaking personally, whenever I hear music, two or three stanzas crystallising my emotion spring to mind at once, without my being aware of any preliminary effort.

Now, I contend that the poet has attained the full flowering of his powers when rhythm commands him with such despotic force. Thereafter, spurning worn-out forms, he can apply himself wholly to capturing the cadences that daily life brings him. Thereafter, vers libre—and here lies one of its most precious qualities—enables him to forge, unshackled, a precise correspondence between his personality and his expressive means. The universe's protean beauty finds a limpid mirror in his poems. In moments of perfect balance, he achieves parity with the tree that sighs contentedly when April's warm breath caresses it, or wails and laments when December's blustering wind flails it and peppers it with icy darts. Everything becomes grist for his rhythmic mill. But the wind, above all, schools him in profound harmonies—the wind, that great lunatic of space, who gallops through quivering wheat, who dances with swallows in the blue sky's heights, who sketches baroque arabesques with village smoke, who whimpers like a wounded dog at door-cracks, who juggles autumn's russet leaves, who capers through road-dust, who turns housewives' umbrellas inside-out like tulips, who billows the roadman's smock absurdly, who puts colour in the curé's nose, who sings, growls, rages, subsides, rages anew, whines, whistles, snickers, howls, thunders—now Punchinello, now the vast melancholic breath sweeping in from the Ocean...

Hear it, poet: now it bellows at you, with tremendous lungs, an epic verse. Now it idly croons a ballad. Now it strikes up the mighty lyre of wild foliage to accompany a vagrant ode. Now it enters

your soul and drives out the black butterflies. Then, quickening and redoubling the sublime flame that devours you, it kindles within you a vast conflagration of purple and gold where your dreams sport like salamanders.

The poet's rhythms take their form not only from the breath and murmur of winding rivers, but from those trees of which I have spoken so often—of which I shall never speak enough—from hills with their tremulous contours, from rocks brooding like dreaming Titans, from waves of the sea, whether they rear like unbroken colts or drift in to expire upon the fine sands of a deserted shore. The forest, the sea, the plains too, where young oats ripple with blue-silver light, where pink sainfoin blossoms and the velvet flowers of crimson clover tremble to the hum of bees—these we must cherish with equal devotion, that they may unveil to us the secret of their splendour.

Into the forest we shall go, to learn from gnarled oaks, smooth-barked beeches, pines with their elegantly tiered boughs, and lissom birches the art of harmonious proportion. We shall venture deep, heedless of return, beneath those ancient groves filled with sacred haze that brings peace to troubled hearts. The aeolian whisper of the high canopy will rock us into rapture. And sometimes, at a turning in the path, we shall see Great Pan himself, piping the dryads through their dance. A friendly trill of greeting—then suddenly he melts into the thicket. We remain behind, exquisitely bewildered, wondering: were we deceived by some play of sun and mist, or has the god, knowing how we honour him, truly granted us his presence?

The sea—we shall pace slowly along its margins. Its shimmering expanse, its ceaseless rhythm, its countenance that changes with the hours: these shall teach us to vary our cadences. The wake of vessels, those violet shadows that mark the currents' path, we shall render into verse. And as the depths conceal lost treasures—nacre and pearl—so shall our stanzas harbour, beneath their melodious enchantment of syllables, riches of sorrow, joy, and dream.

But forest and sea possess a terrible beauty. Linger too long in their company and we lose ourselves entirely; we cannot pull away, we yearn only for that vegetative life empty of desire and thought. This is why, once saturated with their visions, we must return to renew ourselves before the spectacle of human toil—out in the plains. There we shall admire the consummate art with which the ploughman draws his furrows, and endeavour to match it in the architecture of our stanzas. Or we shall follow the sower as he casts abroad the golden seed. Then, taking our cue from him, we too shall sow our poems with luminous words.

The day's labour complete, satisfied that we have given our utmost, we shall sit down among the grasses of some nearby orchard. We shall receive the clear radiance of the stars. And in recompense for our earnest efforts, we shall hear the music of the spheres.

Poet, these are—setting aside the Ineffable—the observations I can offer you concerning the rhythm of verse. All poetic art distils to this: approach nature with an open heart; interrogate the trees, the waters, the mountains and fields. Enter into communion with the elements. Wait humbly for essences and appearances to flow into you. Then, when your soul, grown too small for the universe it contains, brims over like a cup too full, shape the surge of your thought according to the wisdom you have gathered from studying the motion of leaves, the run of waters, the vagaries of the wind.

Allow me, in closing, to offer one counsel—of a moral nature.

Whenever you undertake a poem, tell yourself: "Tomorrow I may die. Let me therefore render these verses as perfect as I am able, so that if I return to the All before my work is complete, I may at least merge with the Forces at peace with myself, knowing I leave humanity an exemplar of beauty."

Translator's Notes

1. A cutting pun on solitaire, which means both "solitary person" and "old wild boar living alone."

2. A chlamys is a type of short cloak worn by men in ancient Greece. It was typically made of wool and fastened at the shoulder, often with a brooch or button. It was commonly used by soldiers, hunters, and travellers during the Classical, Hellenistic, and Byzantine periods.

3. Arcturus's torrent of occultist references spans the late nineteenth-century's esoteric revival. Atma and Karma are Sanskrit terms from Hindu and Buddhist philosophy denoting the soul/supreme self and the law of cause and effect respectively; the perispirit and astral plane derive from Spiritualist and Theosophical doctrine, referring to the subtle body and a non-physical realm of existence. The Sepher Yetzirah (Book of Creation) is a foundational text of Jewish Kabbalah; the Pistis Sophia a Gnostic scripture. Éliphas Lévy (1810-1875) was the pen name of Alphonse Louis Constant, the century's most influential occultist whose works sparked the French occult revival. Fabre des Essarts (1848-1917) founded a neo-Gnostic church in Paris. Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831-1891) established the Theosophical Society and authored Isis Unveiled and The Secret Doctrine; the Duchess of Pomar (Lady Caithness, 1830-1895) was a prominent Theosophist and spiritualist who hosted fashionable séances in Paris. Papus (Gérard Encausse, 1865-1916) revived Martinism and wrote prolifically on occultism; his journal L'Initiation (founded 1888) was the period's leading esoteric publication. Stanislas de Guaita (1861-1897) founded the Kabbalistic Order of the Rose-Cross; his Le Serpent de la Genèse (1891-1897) examined the problem of evil through an occultist lens. Sir William Crookes (1832-1919) was a distinguished British chemist and physicist who controversially investigated spiritualist phenomena; Dr Paul Gibier (1851-1900) was a French physician and bacteriologist who, like Crookes, attempted scientific studies of mediumship—though evidently with conclusions Arcturus found objectionable.

4. Sadi Carnot, President of France from 1887 to 1894, whose attendance at Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show during the 1889 Paris Exposition represented official endorsement of the spectacle. Henri de Régnier's ironic reference to him as the "repository of power" and description of his "dark and kindly" demeanour (likely referring to his dark beard and benevolent manner) underscores how even the highest authorities were complicit in this vulgarisation of exotic cultures.

5. A 19th-century French criminal term for a mugging technique where one assailant distracted the victim while an accomplice strangled them from behind to rob them. The author is making a sardonic joke: these Cowboys are so skilled with the lasso that they'd be perfect for strangling people in dark alleys using this notorious technique.

6. Almah or Almeh was the name of a class of courtesans or female entertainers in Egypt, women educated to sing and recite classical poetry and to discourse wittily. They were educated girls of good social standing, trained in dancing, singing and poetry, present at festivals and entertainments, and hired as mourners at funerals.

7. A caustic reference to the newly-completed Eiffel Tower (1889), which many Parisian intellectuals viewed as an ugly iron monstrosity. The author's sexual metaphor presents the tower as a phallic symbol of modernity's violation of Paris, the "second deflowering" suggesting the city had already been

debased once before, likely alluding to the Luxor Obelisk erected in 1836—another imposing vertical monument that marked an earlier moment of cultural spectacle and imperial display.

8. Coenraad Johannes van Houten (1801–1887) was a Dutch chemist and chocolate maker known for the treatment of cocoa mass with alkaline salts to remove the bitter taste and make cocoa solids more water-soluble; the resulting product is still called "Dutch process chocolate".

9. Aristide Cavaillé-Coll (1811–1899) was a French organ builder. He has the reputation of being the most distinguished organ builder of the 19th century.

10. A character from Léon Hennique's novel *Un caractère* (1889), obsessively devoted to collecting Louis XIV memorabilia and all things related to the Grand Siècle. Retté invokes this figure ironically to mock the Exposition's hodgepodge of displays, suggesting that even a monomaniac collector of baroque antiquities would be appalled by the aesthetic chaos.

11. People from Ceylon (modern-day Sri Lanka), then a British colony. Their presence at the 1889 Exposition reflected France's colonial exhibitions showcasing peoples from various empires.

12. The monkey deity in Hindu mythology, renowned for his devotion, courage, and strength.

13. A decorative technique using different tones of a single colour, particularly common in Delft pottery, creating monochromatic designs in blue and white.

14. French for awkwardness or clumsiness, here used appreciatively to describe the charming naïvety of folk art representations of biblical scenes.

15. Named after Colonel Charles Ragon de Bange (1833-1914), who revolutionised French artillery design. The de Bange system, introduced in the 1870s, became a symbol of French military modernisation and national pride.

16. Henri d'Orléans (1822-1897), the fifth son of King Louis-Philippe, who lived in exile in England after 1848 but returned to France in 1871. He donated his Château de Chantilly and its collections to the Institut de France.

17. (1814-1896): French statesman and philosopher, briefly Prime Minister (1876-77). The image of him kissing the Duc d'Aumale represents Republican reconciliation with the Orleanist monarchy.

18. A traditional Russian headdress, typically ornate and crescent-shaped, worn by women. Its presence suggests the dubious authenticity of the "Russian" orchestra.

19. Francisque Sarcey (1827–1899) was a French journalist and dramatic critic. He contributed to Le Figaro, L'Illustration, Le Gaulois, Le XIXe Siècle and other periodicals; but his main interest was dramatic criticism, of which he had his first experience in L'Opinion nationale in 1859. In 1867 he began to contribute to Le Temps the "feuilleton" with which his name was associated till his death. According to the Encyclopædia Britannica Eleventh Edition, he was a masterly judge of acting and of stage effect; his views as to the drama itself were narrow and indifferent to artistic progress. For example, in 1896, he reviewed the premiere of Alfred Jarry's play Ubu Roi—a precursor of the Theatre of the Absurd—and called it "a filthy fraud which deserves nothing but the silence of contempt." Such opinions made him a subject of ridicule among the rebellious young artists and writers of Montmartre. Between 1886 and 1893, the writer and humorist Alphonse Allais published a notorious series of newspaper columns under Sarcey's name with titles such as "How I Became an Idiot."

20. A Malay/Javanese word for village or compound. The Javanese kampong was a popular colonial exhibition at the 1889 Exposition featuring traditional dancers and musicians.

21. Aurélien Scholl (1833–1902), was a French author and journalist. He was successively editor of Le Voltaire and of L'Écho de Paris. He wrote largely for the theatre, as well as a number of novels dealing with Parisian life.

22. The gossipy, meddlesome concierge in Balzac's novel *Le Cousin Pons* (1847), representing the archetypal intrusive Parisian concierge.

23. An underground temple or tomb, particularly associated with ancient Egypt.

24. Tristan Klingsor, birth name (Arthur Justin) Léon Leclère (1874-1966), was a French poet, musician, painter and art critic, best known for his artistic association with the composer Maurice Ravel.

25. https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/cb344302850/date

26. The Pravaz syringe is a historical hypodermic syringe developed by French physician Charles-Gabriel Pravaz in 1853. It was a significant advancement in medicine, enabling the injection of medication directly into the body, particularly for localized pain relief. While others had experimented with similar concepts, Pravaz's design, often made of silver and featuring a screw mechanism for precise dosage, gained prominence.

27. Hôpital de La Charité was next to l'Hotel Dieu, one of the most ancient hospitals in Europe, and it was situated in the Rue des Saints Pères in S. Germain. La Charité was founded in 1606 by Marie de Medici for a religious community, the Frères de la Charité, who were surgeons or apothecaries.

28. Denis-Auguste Affre (1793-1848) was a French clergyman who served as Archbishop of Paris from 1840 to 1848. He was killed while trying to negotiate peace during the June Days uprising of 1848.

29. a short cape with a hood, worn by the Pope, cardinals, and some other ecclesiastics.

30. a cross or crucifix worn on a long chain around the neck so that it rests on the chest, worn especially by bishops, abbots, and priests.

31. In the original French, Verlaine shifts from the formal *vous* ("you") to the intimate *toi* ("you") in these lines. This change from formal to intimate address—impossible to render directly in modern English—reveals the depth of emotion: beginning with disbelief at the formal report of death, then breaking into the raw, intimate cry to Rimbaud himself as "god among the demigods."

32. This is a reference to Max Nordau (1849-1923), a Hungarian-Jewish physician and social critic who wrote the influential book *Degeneration* (*Entartung*, 1892). In this work, Nordau attacked modern art and literature, including the Symbolists and Decadents, as symptoms of societal degeneration and mental illness.

33. A humorous Latin phrase meaning "about everything that can be known... and certain other things besides." The first part (*de omni re scibili*) was a medieval scholastic formula referring to universal knowledge; the playful addition (*et quibusdam aliis*, "and certain other matters") was sometimes appended ironically to suggest discussion of matters beyond mere human knowledge. Retté uses it here with gentle mockery to characterise the wide-ranging and sometimes pretentious intellectual discussions at these literary gatherings.

34. In Greek mythology, Atalanta was a virgin huntress who vowed to remain unmarried. She was eventually defeated in a footrace (and thus won in marriage) when Hippomenes distracted her by throwing golden apples. Swan's reference to "Atalanta before the apples" evokes her in her state of untouched, swift innocence—before the apples that led to her marriage and loss of maidenhood.

35. Saint-Mégrin: A handsome courtier at the court of Henri III, known for his elegance and rumoured romantic liaisons.

36. Greek irregular soldiers known for their fierce moustaches and military prowess during the Greek War of Independence.

37. François Claudius Koenigstein, known as Ravachol (1859-1892), was a French anarchist who carried out a series of bombings in 1892. He became a martyred hero to some anarchist circles after his execution. The reference to literary figures declaring themselves his "fervent disciples" reflects the period's fashionable flirtation with anarchist ideas among certain intellectual and artistic circles—what Swan is mocking as a trendy pose rather than genuine political commitment.

38. Johann Kaspar Lavater (1741-1801) was a Swiss poet and physiognomist who believed you could determine someone's character from their facial features and physical appearance. In the text, Harold Swan is mocking M. de Goncourt's assertion that men with large bottoms have feminine characters. By calling him "Lavater à rebours" (Lavater in reverse/backwards), *Swan* is making a witty jibe that Goncourt is doing physiognomy wrong—drawing absurd conclusions from physical features that don't match reality at all. It's like saying he's got the whole science backwards.

39. "Old Hecate" is the ancient Greek goddess of magic, crossroads, and the moon. She's often associated with witchcraft and the night. "Uranian Cotytaris" is a much more obscure reference. Cotytto (or Cotyto) was a Thracian goddess associated with wild, licentious nocturnal rites. "Uranian" means "heavenly" or "celestial" (from Uranus, the sky). So "that Uranian Cotytaris" is *Harold Swan* making a mockingly erudite, pretentious reference—calling the moon "that heavenly goddess of wild nocturnal rites." The phrase "as M. du Plessys would have it" signals that Swan is parodying the overly ornate, classical references that symbolist poets like Maurice du Plessys would use.

40. "*O Russia—quando te aspiciam!*" is Latin meaning "O Russia—when shall I see/behold you!" This is a witty literary parody. The original Latin phrase "O rus, quando te aspiciam" comes from Horace's *Satires* (Book II, Satire 6), where the Roman poet yearns for the countryside, saying "O countryside, when shall I behold you!" It became a famous expression of longing for rural retreat from city life. *Harold Swan* cleverly changes "rus" (countryside) to "Russia" - completely subverting the meaning. When his fellow passenger tries to engage him in political discussion (presumably about French-Russian relations, which were a hot topic in the 1890s with the Franco-Russian Alliance), Swan deflects with this pun. This is typical of the whole piece's satirical style—using erudite references to make jokes and ward off bores.

41. In French, "ramène" (brings back) rhymes with "Théramène." The "récit de Théramène" is a famously elaborate death speech from Racine's Phèdre, often cited as the epitome of classical bombast. Swan's assumption that a soldier's simple ditty would naturally invoke Racine is part of the satire on literary pretension. The joke is multi-layered:1. "Ramène" (brings back) rhymes with "Théramène"; 2. Swan assumes a common soldier singing a simple song about birds would naturally rhyme it with this highbrow classical reference (absurd!); 3. It's another dig at pretentious literary types who can't hear anything without thinking of classical allusions.

42. "Fouquiers" refers to critics and journalists writing in the style of Henry Fouquier (1838-1901), a French journalist and drama critic who wrote for *Le Figaro* and other publications. He was known for his conservative views and hostile criticism of Symbolist literature.

43. Lieutenant-Colonel Hubert-Joseph Henry (1846-1898) was a French military officer who forged documents to incriminate Alfred Dreyfus in the infamous Dreyfus Affair. When his forgeries were discovered in August 1898, Henry was arrested and placed in Mont-Valérien prison. On 31st August

1898, he was found dead in his cell with his throat cut by a razor, an apparent suicide. His death marked a crucial turning point in the Dreyfus Affair, as it exposed the military's fabrication of evidence and strengthened the case for Dreyfus's innocence. The news shocked France and vindicated Zola's accusations in *J'Accuse...!*, published earlier that year.

44. Here, the audience is mockingly demanding that Francisque Sarcey, the powerful conservative theatre critic, give them an impromptu lecture instead of enduring Laforgue's experimental verse. It's both a protest against the play and an ironic appeal to theatrical orthodoxy's chief guardian. Initially referring to a small vessel—made of glass, tinplate, or pottery—containing oil or tallow and equipped with a wick for illumination, *lampion* also held theatrical significance. The exclamation "Des lampions!" was once used in theatres to call for lighting. By extension, the phrase *demander quelque chose sur l'air des lampions* came to describe a rhythmic, often insistent public demand, typically chanted in three-syllable bursts, echoing the cadence of the original theatrical call.

45. *Quos Ego*: "Whom I—!" Neptune's famous unfinished threat from Virgil's *Aeneid* (I.135), when the god quells the storm-winds wreaking havoc on Aeneas's fleet. The phrase became proverbial for an authoritative intervention that needs no completion to be understood—the theatrical equivalent of "How dare you!" The truncated syntax itself conveys the speaker's fury and power.

46. The key points:

- *whited sepulchres*, Biblical reference (Matthew 23:27) to hypocrisy; here the theatre directors are outwardly respectable but inwardly corrupt
- *marabout tombs*, North African holy men's shrines, often white-domed
- *Dolorous Gard*, Lancelot's castle in Arthurian legend, before he renamed it Joyous Gard

Kahn is essentially saying: the theatre establishment is a fortress of death and hypocrisy that no heroic knight can breach—so the Symbolists are reduced to talking about their dramas rather than staging them. The imagery links theatrical Paris to a spiritual wasteland dotted with tombs.

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